

Monster Musume

Monster Girls
on the Job!



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PROLOGUE

LET'S WORK!



“**I**N OTHER WORDS,” the woman in sunglasses said solemnly as she lifted her coffee, “I’d like your group of monster girls to start working.”

“I’m sorry?” Kurusu Kimihito tilted his head at her.

This was his interspecies cultural exchange coordinator, Ms. Smith. Though she had the picture-perfect look of a businesswoman, she was hopelessly disorganized. It was unclear whether she was too busy or just lazy, but she always lost track of things and surprised Kimihito with short-notice requests.

That was what led him to his current living situation: seven monster girl exchange students in his home, under his care.

Today there were even more, because Smith had brought the four members of MON with her, which meant this would definitely be more of a pain than usual.

“It’s another part of the Interspecies Cultural Exchange. Miia and the other girls have been here under the pretext of a study abroad so far, but eventually, we intend to expand the liminal presence into the workforce. We’d like to set some precedent ahead of that.”

“What kind of ‘precedent’?”

“At this point, liminals are able to work part-time, but in the future there’ll be more and more who want to work at companies or start their own businesses.” She remained serious. “So we’d like some examples of liminal labor to show off.”

“Ahhh,” Kimihito replied, “I guess I understand that.” There was still some doubt in his voice.

“That’s why...” Smith trailed off as she looked to the girls lined up behind Kimihito.

Miia, the lamia.

Papi, the harpy.

Centorea, the centaur.

Mero, the mermaid.

Rachnera, the arachne.

Suu, the slime.

And Lala, the dullahan.

Each of these seven monster girls had her own charms and idiosyncrasies and, through her unique circumstances, had come to live at Kimihito's house.

"These girls are going to be our test cases. That said, for them it'll probably just be part-time," Smith concluded.

"How'd you decide on us?" Kimihito replied.

"C'mon, who else is there? It's the only home with this many different types of monster girl living together. Plus, Miia-chan has experience as a priest. Even if I really tried, I'd never find such a convenience—"

"Aha!" Miia protested, her ears pricking up, "Smith-san just said 'convenient'!"

"N-no! What I meant to say is there are so many excellent girls gathered here that I knew you'd be perfect for this important duty! Girls I could proudly introduce to any workplace!"

"Is that true?" Miia asked, narrowing her eyes.

"Absolutely." Smith maintained her poker face.

Kimihito, meanwhile, scowled as he mulled the proposal over. Smith had been very helpful in the past, so he didn't want to refuse her request, but it wasn't going to be him doing these jobs. He couldn't force this responsibility onto the girls.

Rather than wait for his answer, Smith thrust a sheaf of papers at him. "These are the businesses that have accepted our request to take a liminal worker for a day."

With the papers held where the girls could see them, Kimihito looked through them.

"This missive mentions a tavern in the city. I suppose my duty would be to service its customers, Milord?"

“Oh, this gig’s on stage. Wonder what I could do for it? A bondage show, maybe?”

“That’s too cheeky, Rachnera!”

“What about Papi? What’s Papi get to do?”

“Suu wanna help, too.”

Papi and Suu, the youngest of the crew, were surprisingly into the idea, while Centorea, Rachnera, and Mero wore complicated expressions—probably because they knew more about how hard work could be.

“Oh!” Smith added, “And I’m assigning the MON members as backup!”

The MON members shouted “what?!” in unison. It seemed that Kimihito’s housemates weren’t the only people she’d sprung this on.

“C’mon, Smith, we’ve already got work pilin’ up back at the office!” Zombina the zombie protested.

“We’re not going to have to use our vacation days for this, are we, Ms. Smith?” Tionishia, the ogre, asked in a voice unusually sweet for her height and muscle.

“Could I even do these sorts of jobs?” mumbled Manako the cyclops. “Won’t I scare the customers away?”

“No! I’m not doing any job that doesn’t involve beating the crap outta bad guys!” Doppel, the doppelgänger, said with finality as she crossed her arms.

These were the esteemed members of MON—Monster Ops: Neutralization. Due to the bylaws of the Interspecies Cultural Exchange Accord, humans were not allowed to harm liminals, so an exclusively liminal special forces team was formed to combat liminal crime. Four valiant women sworn to protect the public using their remarkable martial specialties.

Of course, Kimihito mostly saw them when they were struggling with some pointless assignment from Smith. They did so much busywork, so many errands, that he had to wonder whether the government needed extra help around the Interspecies Cultural Exchange Office, too.

“Oh my! Did I forget to mention?” Smith said, raising her eyebrows above the

frame of her sunglasses.

“Were we supposed to figure it out just from you saying you wanted us to come with you to what’s-his-face’s house?”

“Now, now. There’ll be bonuses for completing this mission.”

“Oh.” The MON team shut their mouths. It seemed even they weren’t opposed to some extra cash.

“All our test cases will be properly remunerated for their assistance on top of the payment for their work. Even you girls.” She gestured to Miia and the rest with one hand as the other rummaged in her purse for a calculator. “Something like...” She input a few numbers and then turned to show the total to the room. “...this much?”

“What?!”

Kimihito couldn’t keep his eyes from boggling when he saw the numbers on the calculator screen. The girls stared intently too, but not all of them were impressed—Mero would’ve seen similar amounts in her royal treasury, and Papi and Suu probably didn’t know math.

“I could buy that new scale moisturizer!” Miia gasped.

“It’s enough for a set of removable shoes,” Cerea pondered.

“And I,” said Rachnera with a smile, “thought I needed a wardrobe update.”

The thought of a little spending money had burst the dam on the girls’ desires. Kimihito was tantalized, too. The government provided the bare minimum compensation for their room and board, with nothing left over for entertainment, let alone hobbies. This windfall would mean a lot to everyone.

But test case or no, work was work. He wouldn’t dream of forcing the girls into this if they didn’t want to—not that he could force them to do anything. “Miia, what do you think? It’s your choice,” Kimihito said, even toned.

“Hmm.” Miia lifted the tip of her tail to her chin and rested her head upon it in thought. “All right, everyone except Darling, let’s huddle!”

“What?!” said Kimihito.

“Sorry, but we’ve gotta talk it over between ourselves!”

“Oh.” Kimihito nodded. “Yeah. Of course.”

The homestay girls formed a tight huddle, Miia at its center, and whispered amongst themselves.

Miia had been the first liminal to arrive at Kimihito’s house, but Rachnera and Lala tended to ignore her seniority. Today, though, they were amidst the group whispering with the rest.

“What should we do? It’s a lot of—”

“Nevertheless, we must consider—”

“I suppose if they’ve given permission—”

“We’re all gonna do it—?”

“Suu agrees—”

“If that’s the case—”

“Righty, then—”

As they reached their decision, Miia slid from the huddle and over to Kimihito. “Darling, we’ve decided! We’ll try it!”

“You’re sure?” he asked.

“It’ll be fiiine! I’ve got my experience as a priestess to fall back on. The others might have trouble, but...” She side-eyed Centorea and fought back a smirk.

“Who cares, right?”

“H-how dare thou mock me! I am certain I shall provide exemplary customer service!”

Rachnera rolled all her eyes. “Don’t get too cocky, Miia. Cafés and bars might seem easy from the front, but there’s a lot hidden behind the counter. You might have to practice your cooking.”

Miia froze. Though her recent training had shown results in the form of mostly edible meals, she hadn’t shed her tendency to over-season everything.

Smith was unperturbed. “There we have it, folks. I’ll send the details later.”

She stood from her chair, seeing her part in the conversation was over.

“S-sure,” replied Kimihito.

“Oh, and Darling-kun—make sure you’re on-site with the girls? I’m sure it’ll help them stay calm.”

“Of course, I was planning on it.”

“All right, we’re done here. Back to the office. Lots to do. Busy, busy.” Smith breezed out the front door of the Kurusu house as quickly as she’d entered.

“Thanks for the coffee!”

The MON members, less practiced at that type of getaway, rose in a flustered group to chase after her. Only Manako took the time to say a proper goodbye, bowing deeply and muttering “Let’s do our best! Thank you for your help!”

“Sure...” mumbled Kimihito in reply. No matter how often this happened—Smith appearing, upending his life, and leaving before he could react—he never got used to it. At least this time, Miia and the others were enthusiastic. They were ready to do their best for the work pilot program, and as their host, he had to be there to support them.

Knowing that didn’t make him any less nervous. “Sorry, everyone, it all happened so suddenly.”

Wriggling her snakelike lower half, Miia slithered toward Kimihito. “No, it’s fine! As long as you’re with me, Darling.”

“Yeah. Let’s all do our best,” Kimihito replied, feeling his anxiety start to dissipate.

“Yeah!” all the girls cheered. Miia punched her arms in the air, Papi extended her wings, and Suu raised her appendages to imitate the pair of them.

And so, another tale of the everyday lives of monster girls began, as they strove to go out into the world as working women.

1

BARTENDER

MIIA • RACHNERA • ZOMBINA



IN A CERTAIN red-light district in Tokyo Prefecture, there was a shop tucked just out of the way of the busy main streets. It was called Bar Zetto N, just a normal adult watering hole for the busy people of the area, with one special exception: the sign outside read “Liminals Welcome.” Places like it were still rare in Japan, so it soon built a reputation among liminals as a place to go for a good time.

More importantly, it was one of the businesses that opted into the Liminal Employment Pilot Program. As the sun set between the buildings, Kimihito, Miia, Rachnera, and Zombina opened the door and stepped inside.

“Welcome to our establishment, Kurusu-sama.” The thirty-something manager of the bar invited them in with a calm smile. Despite his slender build, it was clear he lifted—toned muscles were visible through his slim-cut suit and apron.

Kimihito bowed his head. “Thank you for having us. I’m sure the request to join the Employment Pilot Program was uncomfortably short notice.”

“Don’t be ridiculous! Bar Zetto N is always eager to facilitate cultural exchange with liminals—like the sign outside says. They’re our neighbors, so it’s important to be neighborly.”

“Thank you,” Kimihito repeated in relief. This was the first business they’d be working for, and he’d been worried there wouldn’t be much support, but the bar seemed genuinely happy to have them.

The other bars around the district had little more than counters to sit at and drink, but Zetto N had a lot of space, filled with upholstered chairs and sofas. The building was arranged so there was ample room for even the largest liminals to stretch out and enjoy themselves. It seemed accessibility had been a key consideration in its design.

“I’ve heard you’re hosting quite a few liminals in your home, Kurusu-sama. It’s impressive that someone so young is so proactive about cultural exchange,” the manager said warmly.

“Ha ha, well, it kind of just happened on its own.”

“Really? Well, even so, I appreciate your effort.” He gave a small, professional smile. “For today, I’ve taken care to only invite regulars who know we’ll have liminals working. That should allow you and the girls to relax and enjoy yourselves.”

“You’ve put so much effort into this.” Kimihito wasn’t used to this amount of forethought. But, that said... “Where are the girls, anyway?”

“They’re in the break room sorting out unifo—ah, here they come.”

Miia slithered out of the “employees only” door in full bartender regalia. She was already gorgeous under normal circumstances, but this formal outfit brought out a certain *je ne sais quoi*. She laughed gently. “What do you think of the new look, Darling? Does it suit me?”

“Y-yeah, you look great, Miia,” Kimihito managed.

“Hee hee...hooray! ♪ But it’s a little tight around the chest...” That was an understatement. The buttons on her white shirt must’ve barely closed in the first place, and under the constant strain of her breasts, were liable to burst right back open. The second from the top had already given in, and thanks to its weakness, her generous cleavage was in full view.

The manager bowed. “I’m terribly sorry for the issue. We hadn’t prepared any other clothes for lamia use. We’ll have to make do for today.”

“Not a problem, I’m fine!” She waved her hands in reply, completely unperturbed. “I just wanna start practicing. Come on, Darling, let’s find you a seat!”

“Huh?!” exclaimed Kimihito as Miia’s long tail lassoed him and yanked him over to the sofas.

Side by side on the seat, she pressed herself to him, breasts squishing against him, making it almost impossible to breathe. “So, Darling...what would you like to drink?”

“M-Miia—aren’t you too close—?”

“Am I? Aren’t I here to do customer service?” her voice fell to a soft hiss, “I’ll service you however you like, Darling, so what’ll it be?” She was as forward as

ever, and Kimihito's face was as red as ever too, a perfect match for her scales.

"Now there's a lawsuit waiting to happen."

"Hmph?!" Miia grunted, turning.

Strings flew from every direction, wrapping her long body in an elaborate pattern of white silk. Rachnera had returned from the back room.

"Hnngh! Hmm!!" Miia struggled against her binding.

Stepping the rest of the way through, Rachnera gave Miia an exasperated look. "You only sit next to your guest if it's a cabaret club. Keep acting like that and you'll bother Honey *and* the manager." Rachnera always had a mature charm to her, and formal attire accentuated it, making her even more bewitching. Her shirt had the same sizing issue as Miia's, several key buttons gaping to show her cleavage.

Kimihito swallowed. "Rachnee. You look...beautiful...too."

"Oh! ≡" She allowed herself a tiny smile at the compliment. "You're such a flatterer, Honey. Today I'm all business, but we could arrange a private showing later in my *parlor*."

"Bwah!" Miia used her dexterous tail to pry the webbing from her mouth. "Hey! Who's being forward now?! I knew you'd do something like this!!"

Rachnera clicked her tongue and looked aside. She was getting too predictable.

"Mnn." Someone was already at the bar. "Whew—*hic*! That's the stuff. Hey, what's with the routine, anyway? Every time we hang out you're fighting over Loverboy there. It's like, calm down, have a drink."

"Zombina! Are you supposed to be drinking?" Kimihito sputtered.

MON's zombie member cackled at them and brandished the bottle she'd been sampling from. "Psssh, it's fine, not like I can get drunk. Hard liquor sterilizes my tissues, so when you think about it, this is practically medicine. Cheers to my health!"

"No, I mean that it's for paying customers!"

“I did pay for it!” She chugged the rest of the bottle. The composition of her zombie body protected it from any sort of rot or infection, so the stuff about sterilization was definitely an excuse. “Hey, manager, another bottle of gin!”

“Stop drinking!!” Kimihito shouted, anxiety coming back around. No one had arrived yet, and the bar was already getting wild. *At this rate, we’re gonna join Zombina in the grave*, he thought.

Despite the ruckus, the manager seemed totally serene. “It’s nice everyone’s so enthusiastic,” he said. “This’ll be an exciting atmosphere for the customers.”

Kimihito frowned in confusion. “Are you sure?”

“Everyone ready?” The manager almost radiated calm. “Bartending is about one thing: customer service. The drinks are important, sure, but what really matters is that the customer has an experience they can’t find anywhere else. If they’re looking for quiet contemplation, you don’t have to talk to them, and if they don’t want alcohol, you shouldn’t cajole them. Figure out what they’re here for and provide it.”

“Yes, sir!” Miia, Rachnera, and Zombina responded in natural unison. The manager’s healing presence had evaporated the tension between them in an instant. They fixed their clothes and prepared to work.

“Hee hee! Get ready to experience the best in bartending, Darling!” Miia said to Kimihito with a wink.

Rachnera winked at him, too. “After this is over, let’s share a drink, Honey.”

Kimihito’s presence was the key to their motivation, but of course, he was incapable of figuring that out on his own. He was just there to observe as their host. Though, as he thought about it, he wasn’t sure what to do with himself for the duration of the night. *I can’t just sit and watch, can I?*

A voice came seemingly from thin air behind him: “Kurusu-sama.”

“Y-yes?!” Kimihito started as he realized the manager had moved without warning.

“If you’re finding yourself idle, you could always lend them a hand.”

“Me?” He pointed at himself as if there were anyone else nearby.

The manager smiled and beckoned for Kimihito to follow, with a twinkle in his eye.

“I’m no pro at this,” Kimihito cautioned as he peeled potatoes for a mash. He’d been conscripted into kitchen prep, and despite his concerns, he had to admit that cooking for the girls had made him a reasonably competent sous-chef.

“Honey, you’re doing fine, especially since you hadn’t expected to help.” Rachnera was in the kitchen, too. The manager had given her a notebook of his handwritten cocktail recipes, which she nodded at occasionally as she read. “Should I speak to the manager?”

“Thank you for offering, but this is probably less stressful than waiting around.”

“If you say so.”

“How about you? Can you memorize all those drinks?”

Rachnera was quiet for a moment. Then she said, “I think I’ve got it figured out. The notes include the liquors, what glasses to use, and the measurements.”

“That’s our reliable Rachnee,” Kimihito said.

She laughed a bit, with an enigmatic smile. But it quickly dimmed, and she touched a hand to her forehead as if she was getting a headache. “The real problem is Miia. Her sense of taste is so wrong that she’s liable to mix poison. The customers’ll pass out at best, and the bar’ll be shut down.”

Her concerns about Miia made sense. “Should I give her a hand? Mixology is similar to cooking, right?”

“These are our jobs. We should be able to figure them out on our own.” She shuffled uncomfortably. “Miia’s trying her best, too. She might actually allow some of my advice into that strange little head of hers.”

“But—”

“I wonder, do you have a disease where you’ll die if you’re not taking care of anyone?” she interrupted with an accompanying side-eye.

“Uh.” He was tangled in her thread of logic and knew he wasn’t clever enough to escape.

She waved her hand to disperse some of the tension. “Just keep peeling your potatoes. I’m not much of a big sister if I can’t help everyone out sometimes.”

“You’ve got me there. I really do rely on you, Rachnee.” Kimihito sighed.

Her smile returned. “What a good boy you are.” Though the circumstances under which she’d entered Kimihito’s household were rather complicated, and their relationship could get violent, at heart she was a calming woman who excelled at taking care of people. Unsurprisingly, their chat had addressed all his concerns, and he almost felt like he could relax.

So, of course a shout from the front of house interrupted them. “Hey, Rachnera! Whenever I use this shaker, the drink gets bubbly and it goes everywhere! What do I do?”

Rachnera scowled and proceeded through to the bar. Her voice carried back to the kitchen: “I want to know what happened here, too! What could you have put in that drink to make it foam so much?!”

Would they really be okay? Kimihito stood numbly at his potato bench. He didn’t like to doubt her, but he knew there were some problems even reliable Rachnee couldn’t solve.

By the time the girls had learned a passable amount about bartending, Zetto N was ready to open for the night. Though Miia and Rachnera had been fighting like cats and dogs (or snakes and spiders, as it were), they settled as soon as there were customers in front of them. They even managed to cooperate on a few orders. Beneath the bickering, there was something compatible about the two girls, though they would never admit it.

“Welcome, welcome! For one night only, I’m here to serve as your own lamia bartender! Please approach the bar and place your order!” Miia’s affable personality could charm anyone, of course.

“What would you like?” Rachnera said, soothing people with her mature disposition. “One Samurai Rock? Of course, just a moment, I’ll make that for

you. Where did I put that sake?” Her self-confidence hadn’t been misplaced—she could mix any drink on the menu without issue.

While the two of them handled the bar, Zombina worked the floor, from the tables to the sofas. “Hey, sorry for the wait; here’s a Red Eye and a mimosa.” Her signature cackle carried over the crowd. “Hm? What do I recommend? Don’t discern between flavors, myself, but how’s about a Shotgun? That’s tequila and sparkling water and—too strong? That’s the whole point!” By most standards of customer service, she was crass and impolite, but for some reason the clientele seemed to like her.

In fact, her crassness made some of them try to push boundaries. “Huh? A comedy routine?” She shrugged. “Dunno why I should, but whatever, here goes.” With a crack, she twisted her arm and broke her elbow so it pointed the wrong way.

Kimihito gaped despite himself and another customer screamed.

Without reacting to the scream, Zombina adjusted her broken arm to offer a short glass of liquor to the customer behind her. “Here’s your highball.” It looked like a morbid version of a contortionist’s performance.

The male werecat who’d suggested the comedy routine stared on in shock... until he came to grips with what had happened and started to cackle madly.

“Physical comedy might break your bones, but jokes’ll never hurt you, huh?” she quipped as a finisher. Despite the initial shock, her stylings had also managed to break the ice—the bar buzzed louder and louder.

“They’re so amazing,” Kimihito muttered.

“Don’t sell yourself short, Kurusu-sama. Have you worked in hospitality before?”

“Oh, no, nothing like this. I just do home cooking. Tomato soup’s up!” He passed the order out from the kitchen. A line of appetizers-in-progress sat across his section of the bench. *Is it okay to do this when I’m not an employee? I guess if it’s supporting the girls...* Maybe he was going a bit too far on the dishes, but it wasn’t hurting anyone.

Smith herself had told him to help the girls as best he could under whatever

circumstances they found themselves in. She'd pointed her finger and said, "If there's a problem with the customers, it's on you to save the day, Darling-kun! It's no trouble if *you* fight another human, so you're there to throw the first punch!"

He'd done it before, so he supposed he could do it again. There had been a man outside a love hotel who had insulted Miia, and Kimihito had landed a real king cobra hit on him. Smith had played fixer that time too, but she couldn't fix his discomfort over the incident.

It didn't compare to how bad he'd feel if he didn't protect his homestay girls. Cooking for them and assisting them on their adventures suited his personality more than fighting, but when push came to shove, he knew he'd jump into the fray for them.

Perfectly flipping the rolled omelet in front of him, he exhaled in relief. *It'll be okay.*

Things were not okay. Particularly with Rachnera, who struggled to handle her own orders while preventing Miia from ruining hers. Her motherly streak had become her doom.

"Careful, Miia. Don't forget to use the measuring cups. Eyeballing it won't work. Check the brand before you pour. The recipe book is right here. The manager would want us to follow it." Rachnera slung a web at the liquor shelves and tugged a bottle into her hand.

Miia flicked the tip of her tail into the shelves and took a different bottle. "Yeah, yeah," she grumbled, "10 milliliters, 20 milliliters, it's basically the same! Measuring is pointless!"

"Hey, the customers can hear. Did you forget you screwed up an order already?"

"Come onnn!"

"Keep making mistakes and even our beloved Honey will get tired of it," Rachnera said, trying to be motivational. She shook a cocktail shaker with a practiced hand.

“Ugh, fine. I’ll do my best!”

Since Kimihito had seen Rachnera get drunk off coffee before, she hoped success here would help restore her reputation. That meant making no mistakes, correcting as many of Miia’s mistakes as possible, and making full use of her innate caretaking abilities.

“Yo.” The bell on the front door rang to signal a new customer. Rather than waiting to be shown a seat, she swept in and took an empty stool at the bar. “I’m completely beat. I got sent mountain climbing as punishment for staying out without permission—how did that kobold stay so energetic the whole way?! I need something really strong tonight.”

“Oh, my,” Rachnera said, and a toothy smile spread across her face. “Is that Lilith? We didn’t even speak of the devil first.”

“H-huh?! Wh-what?! Mistress Rachnera?!” This customer didn’t look nearly old enough to drink, but her unusual eyes were full evidence that she wasn’t human.

Yes, it was Lilith, Rachnera’s demon friend. She wasn’t part of their household, but she’d caused problems there often enough and had even been “disciplined” by Rachnera once, after she’d almost brought harm to Kimihito. Whether Rachnera’s disciplinary measures were too harsh, they’d at least convinced Lilith to behave like a good little girl in their presence—not that any of those words applied to the young-looking adult demon.

“Why—when did you start working here, Miss Rachnera?”

“It’s just a favor for Smith. Don’t I look nice in the uniform, though?” She raised her arms and did a half-turn to show off.

“Yes, mistress,” her voice fell to a gentle, flirty tone, nothing like how she’d yelled as she entered. “Lovely as ever.”

It seemed that, though Rachnera had let Lilith free from their bondage session, some of the webs remained wrapped around her heart. “Well, what would you like to drink?” she asked.

“Oh, gosh, um...do you have any sweet, cute cocktails, maybe...?” She was really overdoing the adorable act.

“An El Diablo, then,” Rachnera replied, businesslike.

“Mmmh!” Lilith moaned at the mere name of the tequila-based cocktail. “A sexy, brusque older woman serving drinks really hits different.”

“Nobody else gets the brusque treatment.” That said, she honored Lilith’s earlier request and was generous with the liquor as she got to mixing.

“Lilith, you drink?” Miia asked.

“Hey! I’m here more often than you, snake woman! I’m a bona fide regular.” Lilith’s temper flared immediately in response.

“Wow, rude.”

“Ask the manager, I’m here all the time. Gimme the usual pizza, too.”

“Already done.” Kimihito came out of the kitchen in his apron with the pizza in hand. “You sure get along with him, don’t you?”

Lilith groaned. “And Miss Rachnera’s host is here, too.”

“Yeah. Rachnee would be fine without me, but I’ve got responsibilities, too.” He raised an eyebrow. “Wait, do you have permission to be here?”

“Of course. I’m getting pretty tired of punishments, so I made sure this time.” As soon as he set the pizza in front of her, she snatched a slice and shoved it whole into her mouth.

“Are you in the neighborhood often, Lilith?” Rachnera interjected.

“Oh, Miss Rachneraaa! I am! There are sooo many perverted old men in the red-light district. I make a lot of pocket money from them.” Her disposition changed again.

“That’s quite an admission,” Rachnera said diplomatically.

Had Lilith noticed that Zombina—from MON—was working behind her? She was busy with a customer, sure, but she kept glancing back at the bar. *Someone’s getting a talking-to later.* With any luck that’d be all she got. There could be real penalties if MON were in the wrong mood after the job placement experiment.

“Anyhoo. That’s how I found this bar. And now that I know you’re working

here, I'll be coming even more often!" Lilith said, resting her face in her hands and gazing adoringly at Rachnera.

"I'm just here for the night." Rachnera slid the glass to Lilith. "Here's your El Diablo."

Lilith leapt at the glass and lifted it reverently to her lips. "Ohhh. Handmade with love by Miss Rachnera." She drained it in one. "Ahhh! That hits the spot. Booze is the best! To booze!"

Rachnera sighed. "You're as two-faced as ever."

It was an obscenely strong cocktail, but that was perfect for a demon like Lilith. "For my kind, it's sooo much more comfortable when there's some discomfort, though. A lack of public safety."

"Is that so?"

"Yes, Miss Rachnera. Japan is almost *too* safe for us! Though that lowers people's guard and makes it easier to spring bad stuff on 'em." She gave a tiny, dreamy sigh. Demons might appear to do what they pleased, damn the consequences, but Lilith had previously proven capable of concern. The fact that she hadn't shown any at the idea of being caught for her misdeeds was troubling.

Zombina watched from among the crowd with sharp eyes. *At least Lilith can't cause trouble here*, Kimihito mused.

Miia sidled into the conversation, messily shaking her next order. "How about this area? How safe is it here?" she asked Lilith.

"We're close to the border between two prefectures, right? Which means it gets a lot of—not *serious* yakuza or anyone actually scary, but small-timers who wanna throw some weight around. Punks like that."

"This bar feels so high-class, though."

Lilith ripped apart the pizza and spoke through the mess of tomato and cheese: "Yeah, 'cause Master *keeps* it classy. Why d'you think I come here?"

Kimihito couldn't help but wonder if the reason she knew so much about the underworld was because she was a demon. Before he could finish that thought,

though, he was interrupted by a commotion out in the street.

“Sir, please stop,” the manager said, wedged firmly in the doorway.

Kimihito turned to look and saw that he was blocking a customer from entering the bar. A huge, red-faced man with an impressive mohawk loomed in the entrance. Even from a distance, the sheen on his nose and cheeks made it clear he’d been drinking.

“I’m sorry, we’re closed tonight for a private event. My apologies.” The manager made it clear he wouldn’t budge.

The man was unfazed. “You’re open, so let me drink! The evening’s barely started!” With a single giant hand, he pushed past the manager and entered the bar. Big as he was, everything else about him made it clear he was one of Lilith’s small-time punks. “Check it out! Empty seats and everything!” Sauntering around like he owned the place, he picked a free sofa and collapsed into it.

He’d left the smell of cheap beer in his wake, and now the other customers’ moods were rapidly turning.

“Ooh, you got nice girls with *big* titties on tap today, huh? Hey, girl! You one of them lime—limey—lime animals? Gimme a drink, *now!*”

“Excuse me?” Miia’s voice went colder than her blood, taking a tone Kimihito had never heard before.

“Seriously...?” Rachnera sighed.

“He’s gotta be kiddin’,” Zombina said.

The trio glared at the punk, who didn’t seem to understand how much trouble he’d landed himself in, and just laughed in response. “C’mon! It’s your job to serve customers!”

“What kind of place does he think this is?” Kimihito gaped at the man. Maybe he was so drunk he’d mistaken it for a different type of bar—this *was* the red-light district, after all. Kimihito never would’ve agreed to let the girls work here if it were that kind of place, though.

“Terribly sorry, everyone, but if this continues, I’m calling the police,” the manager said. Though he’d physically withdrawn, his eyes remained hard. He

was determined to get this man out of his bar at any cost.

“Miia, feel free to stay in the back for a while,” Kimihito told her quietly.

She smiled in response. “Hey, Darling?” If her smile was usually megawatt gorgeous, this one was as blindingly beautiful as the sun—which Kimihito suddenly realized meant she was *furious*. “Leave that customer to me.”

“No. No. No way. What’re you going to do to him?”

“Would it be better for Spidey or Zombina to handle it?”

He paused. “Huh.”

“Hey! What’re you whispering with him about? Why bother with that shrimp when there’s a big catch over here?” the punk yelled, patting the seat beside him.

“Hmm. ‘Shrimp’?” Kimihito muttered to himself.

Miia’s smile was interrupted by her lips twitching. She was about to go off.

“Looks like you want to handle this,” Rachnera said. “Go give him the help he deserves, Miia.”

“R-Rachnee...” Kimihito said.

“Don’t worry. I’ve got her covered. Let us take care of this, won’t you, Honey?” Rachnera said with a wink. It wasn’t clear what the girls had planned, but they seemed confident.

“That’s right, Darling. Leave it to us.” Miia slid from behind the bar and slithered towards the punk.

Kimihito watched, frozen in place.

“Aw, you’re worried.” Zombina slapped his shoulder from behind. “Worse comes to worst, I’ve got a solution prepared.” She adjusted her suit jacket to show—a handgun?! Was it real? Zombina was skilled with a gun, sure, but it was against the Interspecies Cultural Exchange Accord for her to harm humans. *It must be a fake she carries to intimidate people*, Kimihito reasoned. *Yeah. It’s got to be.*

“Miia,” he said to himself as he watched her approach the punk with that fake

smile plastered on her face. As bright as it was, he could tell that was just the scorching hate within.

“Ssscuse me,” Miia hissed as she slid into the spot he’d indicated, “I’m Miia. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

Concerned that their presence would start a fight, the manager escorted Kimihito back through to the kitchen where he could watch discreetly over the serving counter. Then, he took his position at the register to process the mass exodus of customers.

“It seems they have some sort of plan,” he said quietly to Kimihito through the kitchen door.

“Do they, sir? This is bad, and it doesn’t seem to be getting better.”

“Hmm...” The manager gripped his chin thoughtfully. “It’s better if we don’t get the police involved. Everyone’ll be happier if that man leaves of his own accord, and whatever Miia has in mind is likely our best shot.” He tried to reassure him with a shallow nod and a forced smile.

Kimihito nodded back. In addition to the manager’s reasons, failure to resolve this situation would be a failure of the work experience trial as a whole. That would reflect badly on everyone involved. They had to trust the girls to get through this.

The punk reached for his whiskey—but at the last minute, he moved his arm behind Miia’s shoulders instead. That trick was too old to work on her; before he completed the motion, she caught his arm and put it back at his side.

“Bastard—!” Kimihito stuck his torso through the serving window, prepared to leap out and throw down. Under the Interspecies Cultural Exchange Accord, Miia couldn’t harm the punk—but Kimihito could and would. Whatever doubts he’d had were gone. They’d settle this humano-a-mano.

Or would they? He noticed Rachnera moving in his periphery, shaking her head slowly. She seemed to be saying, “Don’t step in, Honey. ≡ Control yourself.”

Meanwhile, the punk continued to try to touch Miia, but she was way too fast for him, snaking from his grasp or returning his wayward limbs to him politely.

“Aw, c’mon,” he protested, “when do I get the goods?” His anger was returning as he realized this wasn’t a cute game of keep-away.

“Oh? Weren’t we clear? This is a normal bar—no touching allowed.” Miia responded. Her smile never faltered, but it also never reached her eyes.

Not that the punk noticed that or her unprecedented tone of voice that sounded like she was talking to a precious, disobedient pet. That tone might’ve been the biggest sign she’d reached a transcendental level of anger.

“Sure, sure, but aren’t all you monster girls here looking to get married?” the punk asked.

“I suppose~” Miia replied.

“Then how ’bout it? Do a good job, and I’ll marry you! You’ve just gotta let me touch those titties, Miss Lamia!”

Miia went completely silent. That was it. She’d ascended to a higher plane of rage.

Yes, there was a hot springs resort where liminals and host families could apply to be matched together. Kimihito had even assisted its proprietor, a Yuki-Onna, once. But the idea that all monster girls were here to find husbands was an insulting stereotype. For a liminal who came to study abroad, their relationship to their host family was vital, which was why a proper matching service for finding the right partnership between them was so important. Besides, she already had that sort of bond with Kimihito. Although...

Smith-san did tell me I’d have to marry one of my guests, Kimihito recalled. That was a completely different situation, though—totally different from going into a normal bar and harassing the employees like this. If he wanted to treat this ordinary bar like it was a brothel, he couldn’t be surprised when he got kicked out on his ass. So why hadn’t anyone done that yet? Why wasn’t Miia crushing that punk like an empty can?

“Oh gosh, what should we do?” Miia faked confusion for a moment, before sticking her pointer finger in the air. “I know! How about a drinking game? If you win, you can touch me however you’d like. Interested?”

You’ve gotta be kidding me! Kimihito screamed in his head. *What is she*

thinking?!

The punk just laughed. “Yeah, hey, why not?! I can hold my liquor though, Miss. You’d better be prepared to keep your promise!”

“Of *course*! But, sir, if I win, you’ll have to pay for both our drinks. Fair?”

“Ha ha ha ha ha! She’s got moxie! That’s how a woman should be. Hey, spider lady, can we get two tequilas?”

Rachnera took the order in silence and prepared two glasses. She was clearly just as furious, but she’d agreed to let Miia take charge, so she didn’t interfere. Zombina delivered the drinks, and the punk accepted them happily, not seeming to notice the dangerous looks from every staff member in the joint.

“Cheeeeeers!” Miia sang.

The two of them downed their glasses in unison, and though Kimihito had heard that tequila was some of the strongest liquor out there, they both reacted like it was water.

“Huh, that’s right. Yeah, that guy’s famous around here. Not many people with mohawks like that,” Lilith piped up as Miia and the punk called for their next round.

“Lilith!” Kimihito snapped around to look to her. “You’re still here?!”

She was staring at the punk like he was the lowest of the low, even by her standards. “He wanders the cabaret clubs and bars around here. He gets the female employees drunk, then molests them while their guards are down. It’s become a big problem.”

“Shouldn’t he get in trouble for that?”

“Places keep banning him. I bet he came here because he’s got nowhere left to go. He’s the worst kind of garbage.” Her eyes narrowed into an intense glare.

The punk and Miia had made it to their second shots of tequila. If what Lilith was saying was true, Miia’s offer of a drinking contest was the perfect cover for his usual MO.

Kimihito’s jaw clenched as he watched. “I’ve got to stop this.”

“If you went out there now, you’d just make it worse,” Lilith said. “Miss Rachnera can step in if she needs help. Watch yourself, human.”

“Ugh,” was all Kimihito had to say about that. He watched Miia and the punk drain their third shots with fists clenched in preparation.

I don’t think I’ve ever seen Miia drink before. None of the girls drank much, but he was especially surprised to see Miia knocking them back like this. She was several shots deep, but she seemed fine. *Is she really okay, though?*

“It’s not healthy to drink on an empty stomach,” Miia said gently, like a mother chastising a child. “Why not order some food?”

“O-okay... I’ll have a snack,” replied the punk.

“Zombina, can you bring us some mixed nuts? Thanks!” Her cheer was less forced than before, the alcohol lifting her mood, but there was still tension underneath. She was stuck beside a no-good punk, and she had to either outdrink him or let him touch her... Of course she was feeling stressed and uncomfortable.

And besides all that, her darling Kimihito was watching all this. She knew he’d be impressed if she handled this herself, but, *ugh*, talk about a big obstacle to a successful work experience. She glared at the punk when he turned away—the man was a mess, his personality was awful, and despite his boasts he was wildly unappealing. He couldn’t hope to compare to Kimihito. He was lucky she hadn’t destroyed him yet.

For now, though, she’d make the best of it. If she could get rid of this customer peacefully, she would totally outshine Rachnera—and Centorea, too. This plan *had* to work.

Kimihito was much too nervous to understand what she was doing, but of course Miia didn’t realize that.

“Sooo, why’s a monster girl working, anyway?” the punk asked.

“It’s a work experience test program, so we’re trying out some jobs,” Miia replied.

“Huh. That’s nice. You’re s’posed to be kinda stupid, so it’d be cool if some of

you got jobs at the cabaret clubs. Yeah, there'd be no problem getting you to drink, then I can do whatever I want."

"I see." Her eyes widened at his speciesist, sexist comments, but she shoved the anger down and refused to let herself respond. If she could, she would constrict him until his bones warped and broke, but she knew she couldn't do that. The Interspecies Cultural Exchange Accord wouldn't let her. That was why she'd devised this roundabout plan to get him drunk in the first place. Shoving aside her murderous desires, she drank another shot. "Mmm! Yeah, that's good!"

"H-hey now, girly, haven't you hit your limit yet? You've sure had a lot."

"Oh? I'm doing perfectly fine, thanks! But what about you, sir? Your face is so red—maybe you should quit before you're too wasted?"

"Huh?!" he snarled, suddenly aggressive. "Don't look down on me! I got this!" He downed another shot and caught up with her.

Miia watched, completely calm and collected, as he overshot his limits. Zombina and Rachnera stared in shock at how well she was holding her liquor. Though arachne were immune to alcohol, a single cup of coffee could knock Rachnera out, so seeing Miia take shot after shot of tequila without any consequences was mind-blowing.

"Ngh—ugh—this is weird," the punk gurgled, unable to focus his eyes.

"Hm? What's weird, sir?" Miia asked him and giggled. Before he could reply, she downed another shot. "Your turn! If you don't hurry up and drink, I'll be the winner."

"Hurgh...th-this has gotta be a trick. Y-yeah, you're just drinkin' water! That's why—I'm so—"

"Oh? Let's test your theory! Rachnee, two shots of tequila!" Zombina already had them ready. "Pick whichever you'd like, sir," Miia offered.

"Damn..." The punk grabbed the glass on Miia's side like he was stealing it. He brought it to his lips. "Hhhgh!" he coughed it right back out. "This ain't water!"

"Nope! Why not drink it? Shot! Shot! Shot!" Miia mockingly cheered him on,

with Zombina clapping along.

The punk groaned and drank. He teetered visibly from side to side.

“Awwwright, my turn!” Miia took hers. “Delicious!”

“Y-you’ve gotta be cheating. I can’t lose, not in a drinking contest—”

“Maybe not against a human. Liminal girls might be ‘stupid,’ but lamia like me are also famously good at drinking.”

“Gh—! Damn it!” The punk, boiling over, made a grab for Miia.

Zombina lurched to intercept, reaching into her cleavage for her gun—

But she had no chance to draw it. “Sorry, sir!” Miia dodged an inch to the side, and the punk fell face-first on the floor. A few silent moments passed, and then snores rose from the heap on the ground. It was a knockout without a single punch thrown.

“Manager, maybe we should call this customer an ambulance. I’m worried about his health,” Miia chirped.

The manager appeared from the back. “Oh, I’ve already called for one.”

Miia’s beloved darling, her Kimihito, followed the manager into the room. “Miia! Are you all right? Did he do anything to you?” he asked, looking her over.

“I’m just fine! Ha ha ha! How did I do?” Miia writhed with pride. She’d dealt with the situation on her own, and she hadn’t even broken any Accord bylaws in the process.

Despite her confident reply, Kimihito needed to look her over and verify for himself that she was okay. Only after he did that could he let himself sigh in relief. “I can’t believe you had a drinking contest with him. I was terrified.”

“You were worried about me? Oh, Darling, that’s so *cute*.” She wrapped her arms around him in a hug—but with her so close, he could tell her breath reeked of alcohol. If not for that, he never would’ve believed that she’d just drunk a giant man under the table.

“You stink,” Rachnera said to the unconscious form of the punk, wrapping him up in her webbing. “Don’t get so close to Honey while you’re in that state.” She

hoisted him to the rafters and then relieved him of his wallet to pay back the cost of the alcohol he and Miia drank.

As Miia held Kimihito and whispered reassurances to him, the smell of alcohol spread further in the air. “Hey, you can really hold your liquor can’t you, Miia?” he observed.

“W-well, yeah.” Her tail wound itself around him, too, as her desire to hold him overwhelmed her. Only now did her face start to turn red—entirely unrelated to the drinking. How could someone who’d pulled off such a ballsy stunt get shy at a simple embrace?

“Do you...like to drink?”

“Oh, no, not really. I drink every once in a while, but I don’t like it that much.” She still wouldn’t meet his eyes.

“But you just drank—how many shots was that?” He was curious, but his tone stayed gentle, trying not to pressure her.

“That’s, um.” She pressed her fingertips together shyly. “I can drink a lot, for sure, but I didn’t want to be drunk in front of you. It’s kind of embarrassing, and I was worried I’d look like an alcoholic or I’d pass out like Rachnera did. I’d rather stay cute and sweet around you, Darling.”

“I’m right here,” Rachnera said.

Miia ignored her. “That’s why I don’t drink at home.”

Kimihito considered. “That makes sense, I guess. But you can feel free to drink if you want to, really.”

“I don’t want to very often,” she said, “but we’re at this beautiful bar tonight, so I’d like to spend some time here together if we can.”

“W-well, I think—” Kimihito looked for the manager, but he was already outside collecting the signboards. A moment later he ducked back inside.

“All the customers I invited have gone home, which means we’re closing now. If you’d like to spend a little longer here you’re welcome. I imagine it was quite a trip to get here.”

“Really?” Miia squeezed Kimihito in joy. “Thank you, sir! Isn’t this exciting,

Darling?”

“Miia! That hurts!” he cried.

“Ah! Sorry, sorry! Are you okay?” She immediately relaxed her hold on him, but there were scale marks left all over his arms and legs, like she’d stamped him red, too.

He was used to it. With a little wave, he indicated he was fine.

“Hey! Don’t just flirt with each other! Honey, c’mon, it’s our turn to drink.” Rachnera complained as she finished with the punk.

Zombina joined in. “I could do with a nightcap,” she said, stretching her arms overhead to remove some of the tension from carrying trays all night. She grinned and flashed her sharp teeth.

Lilith hadn’t moved an inch, but now she turned to the manager. “Can I stay a while?” Her tail curled around her quizzically.

“Of course, Miss Lilith,” he responded with a bow.

The punk had ruined her relaxation, and everyone else’s mood, too. Kimihito mulled the night over. *The girl’s first job experience... I was pretty worried, and yeah, it could’ve gone better.* Miia led him over to a seat at the bar. *But we’re all having a good time in the end. I’m glad we did this.* He breathed a sigh of relief.

“Here you go, Honey,” Rachnera said, offering him a cocktail. “Sorry for the wait. It’s a Kir.”

“Thanks, Rachnee.” He took the wine glass and sipped. It was white wine with crème de cassis mixed in, and as the comfortable flavor of the black currant liqueur washed over him, he smiled. The glass had a small spider web, weaved by Rachnera herself, stuck to the side. It looked almost like a high-class glass etching.

“Mmn, ahh!” In the seat next to him, Miia gulped another shot of tequila. *Hasn’t she had enough?* Kimihito wondered.

Rachnera was nursing a coffee-based cocktail behind the bar. “A reward for a job well done,” she said.

"I guess," he replied. Tomorrow, he'd continue the work experience pilot program at a different site with a different group. With any luck, it would go much more smoothly.

"I'll be sure to tell Smith-san how well you all did." The manager commented as he cleaned a glass behind the bar.

Zombina grinned. "Yeah! Tell her how badly we owned that punk who broke in. I bet we'll get a bonus for it!"

"Yay, Darling! We'll get paid!" Miia wrapped herself around Kimihito again.

"Guh!" Kimihito blurted. She was even more touchy-feely than usual, probably because she'd been drinking. He always thought he'd gotten used to it until her huge lamia body slammed into him again.

"Miia, let go of him," chastised Rachnera.

"No!" Miia protested.

"You lush." She sighed in exasperation. "Honey, wouldn't you rather spend time with me? Haven't I done a perfect job bartending?"

"*You're* the lush!"

"I'm not even tipsy yet." She leaned over the counter to whisper in Kimihito's ear. "Say, Honey...why don't you give some thought to who you'd like to marry? Since we're all relaxed here together, it might be fun for you to tell me where you're at, don't you think?"

"Rachnera!" Miia shouted, close enough to have heard. "Cheater! Don't you dare take advantage of this situation! And it doesn't matter anyway, because Darling's going to marry *me*!"

"Who doesn't dream of having a drunk for a wife?" Rachnera snarked.

"Says the girl who gets drunk on coffee," Miia hissed, trying to be intimidating.

Ugh... Kimihito was still helplessly wrapped in Miia's tail. *So much for teamwork; back to biting each other's throats out.* Then, out of nowhere, some things came together in his mind. "Hey, you two seemed pretty excited about the job opportunity. Why was that? Is there something you want to buy with

the pay?”

The fight between them abruptly stopped. Miia and Rachnera looked each other in the eyes, and an understanding passed between them, though Kimihito wasn't privy to what it was.

“That's a secret,” they chimed in unison.

“Huh?” Kimihito had no answers and more questions. In an instant, they'd gone from at each other's throats to giggling like best friends. He didn't get it, couldn't get it, and wouldn't get it unless they decided to explain.

“Ahh, youth,” Zombina laughed, and Lilith clicked her tongue dismissively.

What's going on? Kimihito wondered with apprehension.

Soon they all relaxed again, secure in the knowledge that they'd done a good job and that their test was a success. Miia and Rachnera spent the rest of the night enjoying their drinks, the quiet atmosphere, and the chance to be close to Kimihito.

2

IDOL

PAPI • MERO • TIONISHIA



“**L**OOK, SNOOKUMS, look at me! ☆ What do you think? Do I look cute?”

Tionishia—Tio for short—cheered as she did a twirl in her lacy new costume. It was a classic idol outfit, easy to move in but flashy onstage, custom made to accommodate her six-and-a-half foot height.

“Y-yeah, it looks good,” Kimihito mumbled.

“Hooray! ☆ Thank you!!” Tio squealed, hopping up and down. For a moment, Kimihito was transfixed. Not only was she tall, but her bust was to scale with her height, and her P-cup breasts bounced with her. The idol outfit had been hastily assembled, so it clung a touch too close to her body and outlined every curve and accentuated every...tiny...motion.

Kimihito flushed red, and he finally managed to pull his eyes from Tio’s breasts. They were in the green room of the Tomas Theater near Tokyo. This was the second test case for liminal employment, this time for the job of “idol.” The three girls—Papi, Mero, and Tio—had already changed into their costumes and were awaiting their big stage debut.

Tio giggled with an excitement which grew with every passing minute. “I can’t believe we’re opening for ANM48! ☆ Wake me up, I’m dreaming!” She was clearly a real idol fan. Though her size was an advantage when taking down bad guys with MON, inside that ogre frame was a real girly girl, someone who loved cute things and cheered everyone on with her sunshine attitude.

Zombina had been unenthusiastic about work to the point of stealing the bar’s liquor, but Tio was so excited that she was already dancing before she even got onstage. Despite their shared work as MON agents, they had completely different personalities.

“Yaaay! Boss, Papi’s an idol!” Papi wore the same costume as Tio, though scaled way down. It was hard for Kimihito to believe that they were really the same outfits—they looked totally different on such contrasting body types.

“Papi, don’t forget to smile! ☆ Smiles are the most important tool of the idol trade!” Tio said.

“Got it!” Papi yelled and showed her biggest smile.

Tio and Kimihito both grinned in reply. *These two might not be real idols, but their smiles are way brighter than ANM48's.*

“Super cute!” Tio affirmed.

“Yaaay! Boss, Papi’s super cute! Pap pap papeee!” She turned her name into a song and spun around in circles. As she whirled and kicked her legs, the miniskirt of the costume flapped up, and Kimihito almost had a heart attack before he noticed the shorts peeking out from under the hem.

Harpies had wings instead of hands, and their legs looked like birds’ legs with long talons instead of toes. Since it was almost impossible for her to fit sleeves over her wings, she usually didn’t wear them—luckily, the idol outfit was designed sleeveless just for her.

Something important occurred to Kimihito as he watched her spin. “Hey, wait...is this really okay? They’re total amateurs. Can they really put on a performance and open for a pro idol group?”

“Don’t worry about it,” someone replied from behind. Kimihito turned to see a middle-aged man with a monocle, who seemed to appear out of nowhere—the managing director of the Tomas Theater and a man with a truly calming aura. “At our theater we’re just happy to see liminals happy. Liminal comfort is our top priority here—our liminal friends are often forced to live with inconveniences, so we built out facilities to cater especially to their needs. That’s why ANM48 and their associated groups perform here so often. If we can improve prospects for liminal employment, it will be a real feather in our cap.”

Kimihito was surprised by the manager’s enthusiasm for liminal rights—though hadn’t he heard something like this before? “Er, excuse me, sir—”

“Yes?”

“Are you at all affiliated with a bar in the city?”

“Oh, Bar Zetto N? Yes, the manager and I are friends, and I drink there sometimes. Is anything wrong?”

“No, no, not at all, sorry.” In the end, the liminal world was rather small. He wondered if the two men talked about their beliefs and had reached the same conclusions through discussion or if they were part of some larger integration

movement he wasn't aware of. Either way, it was clear that their warm hearts and open minds had led them both to participate in the program despite the short notice. They shared that much at least.

"Anyway, there's no need to worry about their performance. I saw some of Tionishia's dancing earlier, and it was *excellent*. She is more than skilled enough for our stage."

"Huh?" Kimihito looked over at Tio, wondering where she'd learned and how she'd gotten good enough to earn praise from an industry insider.

"Yeah! I'm gonna be just fine, Snookums." She clasped her hands in front of her chest, eyes sparkling. "See, I'm a super-huge ANM48 fan! ☆ I've practiced all their dances, and I can do their full set perfectly. Just watch!" On cue, she started a bouncy routine, keeping time perfectly even though there wasn't any music.

The managing director produced a phone from his pocket and started to play a pop song. Though Kimihito couldn't name the tune, he knew it must have been by ANM48.

As the music echoed through the green room, Tio shifted her dance slightly to match her movements to the song. She stepped left and right, sweeping her hands in complex patterns. "Hmm hmm hmm~ ♪" she hummed along. It was a complex, strenuous dance, but she barely broke a sweat—her MON work was probably even more strenuous. She was so *strong*.

"Annnd...there! ☆" She struck the final pose with a wink.

"Wow—amazing!" Kimihito clapped without intending to. Watching her, he'd forgotten that he wasn't watching a real idol's performance, but her massive frame made it uniquely striking to watch. Now he understood why the director said she could be a real idol. "You'll definitely do fine."

"Hee hee hee. That's why Ms. Smith picked me for the job! I asked her especially. Papi and I are gonna do our best!" She looked over at Papi, whose eyes shone in admiration of her partner's dancing.

"Awesooome! Papi wanna do that, too!" Papi did a sharp turn. It wasn't as precise as Tio's, but it was clear she'd had some training.

“Wait, Papi, when did *you* learn to dance?” Kimihito asked.

“Papi’s been practicing!”

“Y-you have? Even though you forget things so fast?”

Papi was a literal birdbrain. She forgot her schedule so often she was constantly double-or triple-booked to see friends. She claimed to remember important stuff, but what she considered important was impossible for anyone but her to know. It wasn’t even clear if she remembered the rules of the Interspecies Cultural Exchange Accord, even though it governed her life.

“Umm, also...Tio said I could go with the flow.”

“Go with the flow?” Watching more closely, he saw that though she was moving in time with the director’s music, her actual moves were different from Tio’s. But she was clearly having a blast, and that was the most important thing for an idol. “So it’s like a game to you,” he commented. It made sense—she struggled with studying but always seemed to remember things she found fun.

It also made plenty of sense that she’d learned the dance through muscle memory. *This could be useful when we need her to remember something. If Rachnera, Mero, and I make a dynamic study plan full of dance and movement...* He didn’t realize it, but he’d fallen into the thought process of a teacher with a problem student.

“Papi, you’re doing so well! ☆” Tio complimented, clapping her hands to the beat.

Papi, thrilled by the praise, grinned and danced even harder. Her wings beat fast, and she shook her hips double-time. Together, they looked like a dance mom and her daughter backstage at their first recital.

“You seem ready for the conce—wait.” Kimihito stopped short as he realized that *three* girls were supposed to report to this job.

It wasn’t surprising, though, that the third girl hadn’t appeared. Given the structure of her body, she’d have trouble dancing at all. *What’re we gonna do about that?* Kimihito wondered.

His thoughts were interrupted by a melodious voice. “Beloved?”

“Yes, Mero?” Kimihito answered.

The mermaid girl rolled closer on her amphibious automatic wheelchair. “Just as we suspected, Mother believes it’s improper for a member of the royal family to become an idol.”

“Ahh,” he said. Mero wasn’t *just* a mermaid on exchange, she was also underwater royalty. When she’d asked her mother—the Queen—for permission to participate when the project was first announced, she’d been denied. From the cell phone in her hands, Kimihito assumed she’d made a second attempt.

“Unless...”

“Unless?”

“If I can keep my identity secret and prevent anyone from finding out that I am the princess, she will allow me to sing.”

“Really?”

“Ms. Smith explained the pilot program in detail, and Mother insisted that those are the only terms she’ll agree to. Even then, she seemed quite reluctant.”

“I-I see. Good for you for trying, Mero.” She wanted to become part of their world outside the mermaid kingdom, and working a job was an important part of that experience. Even with conditions attached, just getting the chance to participate clearly meant a lot to her.

“So, in conclusion, although I can’t join you onstage, I will still be able to support everyone as a singer.”

“All right, Mero!” Papi shouted, going into overdrive and accelerating to comic speeds. They’d all been hoping for Mero to join; it would’ve been so sad if she’d come this far and not had a chance to participate.

“In that case,” the director said, taking his monocle in hand, “Tionishia and Papi will open with their dance, and then we’ll have Mero sing. We can find a veil somewhere in the prop department to hide her face.”

“Please, sir, that would be wonderful,” Mero said with a smile. She pressed

her webbed hands together in delight.

“Very well, we’ll proceed with that as our plan. Since Kimihito-sama is here to observe, we’ve prepared a seat in the wings.”

“Thanks, and sorry for the trouble,” Kimihito replied.

“Not to worry! I’ve got to check in with the crew now, so I’ll take my leave.” With a bow, the director left the green room.

“I’m so relieved—I’ve wanted to work for *such* a long time, but Mother would never give her approval. It’s a delight to help you on this test case, Beloved.”

“Hah,” Kimihito laughed, “it’s so Mero, being desperate to work.” Common folk like him tended to dread their jobs, but it made sense that the idle rich would get tired of sitting around.

“Do you think so? I think hard work is its own reward! Especially when it’s for someone’s entertainment, like it is today. That’s the best sort of job.” She gazed at him with innocent joy.

Kimihito couldn’t look her straight in the eye—she was too radiant. Jobs like that weren’t exactly common in the human world, but he didn’t want to spoil her fun by saying so. For the moment, she was right—they were idols, they would make the crowd happy, and everyone would have fun in the process. “I’m glad you got your wish, Mero, even if you can’t show your face.”

“Yes! Did you know that I’m a very confident singer?! Ahh~ ♪ Ahhhh~ ♪” she sang, running through an escalating scale exercise over a wide range to flaunt her skill. Just like the others, she’d been practicing for quite some time. Or maybe... Mermaids were said to entrance sailors with their voices, and as a member of their royal family, Mero might’ve inherited that kind of bewitching singing voice.

“That’s amazing,” Kimihito said. Tio, Papi, and Mero had all worked hard to practice for the performance today. He’d expected to help them on this job, but it didn’t seem like there’d be much left for him to do. *Maybe I’ll get to relax and enjoy the show?*

No sooner had that thought crossed his mind when he heard a tearing noise, followed by a scream from Tio. He turned to look and discovered that her

costume had torn. The tear wasn't huge, but it exposed the dark skin of her back and the hooks of her bra.

"I-I ruined it," she said, her eyes welling with tears. Well, she had been bouncing around—especially her breasts—which had put a lot of pressure on the already tight outfit.

"It'll be fine!" he assured her. "I have a sewing kit with me."

"Really?" Tears averted. "Snookums, you can fix it?"

"Sure! It's a clean tear, so it'll be easy to stitch up." He pulled a travel sewing kit out of his pocket. Tio had torn her clothes before when they were out together, so it felt appropriate that he was prepared to help her again.

"Th-thank you..." She crouched in front of him so he could reach her back.

Trying his best to ignore the bra strap, he threaded the needle and started to loop stitches through the torn shirt. Quick as a blink, he'd sewn it back up. *Guess today I'm the wardrobe department.* Maybe he wouldn't be useful onstage, but there was plenty he could help with backstage.

"Tio!! Don't cry!! Idols!! Gotta!! Smile!! Yeah?" Papi said, flapping her wings supportively.

"Yeah, Papi-chan...you're right! I gotta smile!! ☆" Tio's smile returned on cue.

"Whatever happens, the three of us shall do it together!" Mero chimed in.

Kimihito smiled too as he finished the repairs on Tio's costume and let the trio's conversation wash over him, their enthusiasm quelling his near-perpetual anxious stomachache. As far as he was concerned, they were real idols, almost ready for their debut performance.

Papi and Tio were the opening act. They waved as they walked out in front of the packed theater.

"Hiya, everybody! I'm Papi from instant unit 'Powerful☆Voice'!" Papi shouted.

"And I'm Tio! ☆ Before ANM48's show we'd like to showcase our songs!" Tio

winked at the crowd.

From his special seat in the wings, Kimihito kept an eye on how things were going.

“Who are these girls? New members of ANM48?” someone in the audience asked.

“Nah, we would’ve heard about them if they were.”

“Y’know, that ogre seems familiar...”

From his spot behind the curtains, Kimihito could hear the murmurs of the crowd and their bewilderment at the change in the schedule. The ANM48 fans didn’t seem sure of what to make of Tio and Papi’s instant unit.

“We’re moonlighting! Um, my day job is—I make sure the liminals play nice with each other and live in peace and harmony! ☆” Tio lied with a broad smile on her face.

Well, it’s not a lie per se, it’s just...a seriously whitewashed version of MON’s work violently suppressing criminal liminals. Idols probably weren’t supposed to do stuff like that.

“And, uh...Papi is Papi!” Papi followed with an introduction of her own. “I’m an exchange student? And I came here today ’cos I want the world to know what harpies are like!”

With Papi’s support, Tio started to really get into it. “Yeah!! We both love idols!! Which is why we asked ANM48 if we could have our own idol experience today! Sorry it’s so sudden, but please cheer for us, too!” She was happier onstage than Kimihito had expected.

Nobody likes an opening act, but with Tio and Papi’s adorable looks and attitudes, they could definitely compete with the idols of ANM48. And the fans seemed to agree.

“I think I like the harpy girl, dude.”

“I’m more of an ogre fan. Hard muscles, soft heart!”

“Big girls *are* pretty cool.”

Even if it was purely based on attraction so far, Powerful☆Voice was clearly making an impact! ANM48 fans tended to be liminal supporters, at least. And on a personal level, their introductions had gone incredibly smoothly, and they'd made a strong case for themselves. Papi smiled without a hint of nerves, and Tio's smile radiated peace to everyone watching. They both owned the stage.

"Okay, let's all play together!" called Papi.

Tio ran with it. "Yeah! This is our first song! ☆"

The backing track started, and their concert began. Kimihito didn't know the genre, but he was pretty sure these were the vibrant pop chords of an ANM48 song. He didn't know the melody, but the lyrics were familiar. It might've even been a special arrangement just for Powerful☆Voice's show.

Tio's dance was as perfect as before. Papi's dance had some vague movements, as she followed Tio and copied her on the fly. They kept close enough time that Papi's delay wasn't obvious, but the fact she never looked at the crowd was its own tell. It was still an impressive display of reflexes that she could keep up so smoothly.

They may have been amateurs, but they danced like they'd been idols for years. They even breathed in unison. Whether Papi was following Tio or Tio was adjusting her movements to accommodate Papi, it didn't matter. They'd clearly worked hard on this, and their practice had made them a great team.

The song continued, and the fans' excitement built as they watched the girls dance. Colored lights swept across the stage to highlight their moves. From Kimihito's limited view in the wings, he had to imagine how beautiful it must've looked from the audience. They'd have those perfect smiles—he couldn't see them from his vantage point since they faced the crowd—and they'd be better synced up from the intended angle. He thought back to the rehearsal in the green room with a twinge of embarrassment. *I already got to see that, though—when it was for my eyes only.* He tried to push the thought aside and focus.

At that moment, the roar of the crowd hit an overwhelming volume.

"Huff...huff...thank you! ☆" Tio shouted, out of breath.

“Hee hee! What’d you think?” Papi waved frantically, covered in sweat.

Despite being in excellent physical shape, both of them were panting hard. It might’ve been the heat of the stage lights or maybe just the sheer amount of energy they’d put into their dance.

Idols are amazing... Kimihito marveled. Whenever he’d caught them on TV in the past, he’d totally missed how much effort so many people had to put in to make a single performance a success. Here and now, watching a live show from the wings, he felt like he was starting to get it. His respect for the girls of ANM48 rose in turn.

“Let’s do the next song!” Papi shouted. She hopped in the air, wings wide, and the music carried over into a new, unfamiliar track and a new, unfamiliar dance routine.

The dance was vigorous, skirts flapping every turn. Even though he knew they were wearing shorts underneath, it was hard to ignore the glimpses of Tio and Papi’s thighs he kept seeing. *No, no, stop it.* He shook his head to banish the lecherous thoughts. Idols were supposed to be pure and innocent! Just because they were dancing wildly didn’t mean he should be staring at their legs.

“Amazing, aren’t they?” came a voice from nearby.

“Director!” Kimihito turned to see the director had joined him in the wings at some point.

He nodded in open admiration as he watched the girls dance. “You’ll need to be careful, Kurusu-sama, they’re about to unleash a powerful move.”

“A powerful move?” Kimihito turned back to the stage, not sure what to expect.

“Here we go! ☆” Tio shouted and raised her right arm straight out to the side, holding it parallel to the ground.

Papi hopped onto it and perched with her bird-like legs.

“Wh-what are they doing?” Kimihito gasped, forgetting he was supposed to be quiet. It looked like the setup to a gymnastic or cheerleading display.

Tio was amazing, able to support Papi’s entire body with just the one arm, but

Papi also showed incredible balance in how she perched there so confidently. Kimihito was suddenly scared they'd fall, but he couldn't tear his eyes away.

"Here we go! ☆" Tio shouted.

"Yeah!" Papi replied.

Tio launched her arm straight up in the air, tossing Papi above her.

"Whoa!" Kimihito and the audience cried out as one, filling the theater with astonished noise.

At first, it seemed like Tio simply threw Papi in a random direction, but the truth was slightly different. She actually used her incredible strength to launch Papi into the air, allowing her to take off. Birds need a running start to fly, and harpies are the same: they need some momentum to get lift. The Tomas Theater didn't have enough space on its stage for her to hit flying speed normally, so Tio stepped in to help. *Kind of like a catapult*, Kimihito concluded.

Powerful☆Voice used their special move to let Papi fly over the audience.

She didn't understand the aerodynamics or thermodynamics or whatever, just that she needed to move fast and Tio had an incredible throwing arm. This move took advantage of both their skills and personalities, and gave them an exciting edge over other performers.

The theater was awash with oohs and ahhs.

"Whee!" Papi cheered as she flew overhead, skirt flapping in the wind. She could tell their move had gotten people excited! She was excited, too! It seemed like their work experience was a huge success.

Wait—wait a minute! It turned out there was a bit of a problem with the whole flying idea. *Which way's the stage again?* As a diurnal subspecies of harpy, her eyes didn't work in the dark, and the dazzling spotlights that washed randomly over the crowd didn't help. Between disorienting darkness and blinding colors, she had lost all sense of direction.

The final issue was...

"Wah!" Papi shrieked as the brilliantly lit stage came into view. The floor

lights were at an angle that would keep them out of the eyes of the concertgoers—but unfortunately pointed them directly at her eyes. She couldn't help but close them, and every time she managed to open them again, she saw another confusing blast of color. There was absolutely no way to know where to go.

Neither Tio nor anyone in the crowd had flown before, so they couldn't understand how upsetting the lights were. Their cheers continued as Papi struggled above them.

The song ended.

She had to return to the stage—now—but she still couldn't find it. As she searched for another landmark to orient herself...a noise rang out!

It was a strange, whistling sound—an artificial bird call. It was so clear and high that it soared over the rest of the theater to reach her. Moments later, she heard it again. Someone was calling for her. A homing whistle.

Kimihito.

“Bossssss!!” she cried and dove towards the noise. Her eyes still stung, and she barely knew which direction she was flying, but she understood by instinct: Kimihito was calling her.

“Guh?!” he shouted.

“Waaaah!!” she wailed.

The sound of a collision rang out through the theater. Papi landed *hard*, but she didn't crash into the walls or the crowd, and now, someone was supporting her.

“Nggh—Boss?” she murmured.

“Are you all right, Papi?” he asked. Kimihito had been waiting for her in the wings, but now he was laid out underneath her on the floor, having taken the full, brutal impact of her dive-bomb. He didn't seem worried, though. He wrapped his arms around her.

Tio, still on stage, shouted, “A-and that's it for us, ‘Powerful☆Voice!’” She was shaken too, but the show had to go on. The audience didn't seem fazed by

Papi's dramatic exit, so it was on Tio to finish their act.

"Thanks, Boss!" Papi wrapped her wings around Kimihito in return.

"No worries. It looked like you were having trouble landing, that's all," he said with a slightly embarrassed smile.

"Heh heh heh... Guess I screwed up a little! We didn't practice the flying onstage, is why."

"But you got through okay in the end, didn't you?"

"Yeah! 'Cause of your whistle, Boss!" Papi grinned. Even if she hadn't slowed down enough to avoid him, she'd made it back safe, which was enough for both of them.

"It was really smart of you to understand that."

"Huh? Understand what?" Papi asked. "I just heard you and followed the noise!"

"Ah...hmm. So was it a harpy instinct?" Birds communicate with chirps, tweets, and whistles—if that worked for Papi too, it was worth practicing for other emergencies. For now, though... "Uh, could you please stand up?" he asked. He'd put his arms around her when she flew in, but she'd made herself comfortable as they talked, sitting with her butt on his stomach.

"Wah! Sorry 'bout that, Boss!" She rolled aside. Of course, as a bird-like liminal, she weighed much less than a human woman her size—but she still wasn't exactly *light*.

A normal man might've been seriously injured in that collision—but Kimihito was used to being constricted, kicked, bound, and drowned without any lingering damage. Considering the violent communication style most of the girls used, he'd adapted to this sort of treatment.

"Papi! Are you okay?" Tio rushed over as soon as she formally ended their set and left the stage. The harpy in question had moved clear of Kimihito and was scratching her head with one blue wing. "Yep...thanks to the boss!"

"Snookums, you're amazing! ☆"

Kimihito was abashed. "It was nothing...hah."

“Boss is awesome!! He always helps Papi when there’s trouble!!” Papi chirped.

“And he can sew! I’m so jealous~!” Tio said, lifting Papi with one arm and helping Kimihito to his feet with the other; she was both as strong and as gentle as ever.

“Boss, didja see Papi’s dance? Pap pap papeee!”

“Did I do okay as an idol, do you think? ☆” Tio wondered aloud.

Despite their contrasting bodies and how quickly they’d formed their unit, they’d been perfectly in sync, just like they hoped. “You were both amazing. I couldn’t tear my eyes away,” Kimihito said.

“Yeah!”

“Yay! ☆”

Even their response was in unison.

On the other side of the curtains, the audience was still cheering. Despite Papi’s rough landing, the show was a resounding success.

“Our next performer—” the director’s voice announced over the speakers. Flushed and smiling, Tio and Papi looked back at the stage.

It was now covered in a diaphanous blue curtain that made the whole stage look like it had been plunged underwater. Through it, Mero’s silhouette could be seen—from the front, she was a vaguely humanoid seated shape in a veil, though in the wings they had a full view of her as she prepared to sing.

“We have a special treat for you tonight: a concert by a mermaid songstress. Known only by the initial M, she is unable to reveal her face, but she wanted to share her song so desperately that she found a way to sing out from beyond the deep.”

The spotlights all turned matching blue, and the crowd thrummed with anticipation. Nobody told them what to do, but the change in the stage’s presentation cued them in, and the feeling in the room shifted on its own. Kimihito peered at the onlookers curiously. *So this is how idol concerts work.*

Mero wore the same outfit as Tio and Papi, but because she wouldn’t be

dancing, her version featured a much longer skirt. The director had prepared the costumes specially for each of them, and Mero seemed happy that she got to match with the other girls. Even though the crowd wouldn't be able to see her, and Kimihito was the only one who'd get to appreciate them as a set, it must have made her feel like a proper part of the group.

"Please drink in the song of our mysterious songstress M before you enjoy ANM48's concert," the director said to intense applause.

Mero waved her hand behind the veil, perfectly poised, perhaps accustomed to this kind of attention from attending events as a princess. She noticed Kimihito watching and gave him his own private wave with a charming, regal smile.

For some reason, it made him feel awkward. He should be used to her smiling at him, but after the director's introduction, he couldn't help but see her as a "mysterious songstress" instead of her usual self.

"Mero...so pretty," Papi murmured.

Kimihito was thinking the exact same thing. She didn't need to show her face; her presence itself conveyed dignity and status. Considering her personality, he wasn't surprised that she could project that through the veil.

The song started.

Mero closed her eyes and clasped her hands against her chest. The anticipatory feeling was washed away as the gentle music reached the crowd. The lights began to shimmer and move like rippling waves.

She raised her voice in song. It was a ballad; slow and gentle, but full of passionate feeling. It spoke of unrequited love, brokenhearted despair, and longing. A sea change from the up-tempo pop track Tio and Papi had danced to. Her beautiful voice engulfed the crowd, mesmerizing them like a fairy-tale mermaid captivating sailors.

The blue lights swayed from side to side. Just as the crowd was transfixed by the mysterious songstress M, so too were Papi, Tio, and Kimihito as they waited in the wings.

Mero cast a glance at them. *Thank goodness*, she thought, *I've been able to*

help my beloved. She was used to being overruled by her mother—forced to stand aside and watch as Miia, Centorea, and the others assisted Kimihito in ways she couldn't. Being part of human society and having the full exchange student experience was important to her, but not nearly as important as supporting Kimihito, who'd gone out of his way to support her, too. Finally getting that chance meant the world to her.

Oh my goodness, I must concentrate! It wouldn't count as a work experience if she didn't do the work! She returned her focus to her song.

Just after the soprano section, she hit a snag. *Is my voice...breaking?* She tilted her head. Perhaps it was too minor for anyone else to notice, but she'd gone off-key for a bar or two. Was her throat sore? She'd been sure to do vocal exercises before the show.

From when she was very young, just a small fry, she'd been tutored in the skills expected of a princess. Vocal lessons had been part of that, including the kind of singing that could entrance the listener. After that extensive training, she could detect even minuscule changes in her voice.

Without pausing the performance, she desperately searched for the cause of her vocal issues. She went through the list of potential causes until she suddenly realized: *My gills are...drying out...?*

Mero had spent most of her life underwater where, of course, she used her gills to breathe. She could breathe perfectly well on land, too—provided her gills remained moist. Now that they were drying out, she was worried. It hurt a little to breathe. This was why her voice had cracked.

What's going on? She could usually breathe without any trouble while she did her daily tasks on land. Some dryness wasn't a problem. On stage, though, she was putting a lot of stress on her voice. Now it wasn't just the performance at risk—if she kept singing like this, she could do lasting damage.

That wouldn't do! She couldn't disrupt her precious performance. She would disappoint Tio and Papi, and ANM48, and the crowd, and the director—and above all, Kimihito, her personal audience of one.

But why was it happening? Why here, why now? Normally her gills would never dry out this fast, even if she was breathing heavily on land. *It couldn't be*

—

She raised her eyes to the spotlights illuminating her. Of course. Even professional idols could overheat under the intense heat of stage lighting. An inexperienced, aquatic creature like Mero would dry out much faster. The rough, sore skin and crackling gills were getting to her, and fast.

Whatever am I going to do? She looked around desperately for a solution. If she'd thought ahead, she could've asked for the stage to be misted, but she hadn't gotten the go-ahead from her mother until just before the show. There was nothing in sight that could help her.

Despite her predicament, she continued to sing—but soon she would reach the chorus, which included the highest notes in the song. With her gills already so dry, she wouldn't be able to hit those high notes.

Water, something wet—anything! She checked the wings over again, eyes darting side to side, and—

Kimihito was gone. *What?!* Her eyes opened wide. *Why would he disappear in the middle of my song?*

Then it clicked into place. When Papi had completed her little flying escapade, she had crashed into him, hard. He hadn't seemed hurt at the time, but in the interim he must have noticed an injury and gone for first aid. There was nothing she could do about that, but—

Her expression fell, and tears pricked at her eyes. She'd always been able to depend on Kimihito when things were hard. He might seem lackadaisical, but he was so reliable in a pinch—for some reason she'd assumed this would be the same, that whatever happened, he'd be there to look after her.

How strange. I always said I would be happy to be his mistress, even if he had a wife...but now...

Everyone knew how much she loved tragic love stories, how she dreamed of living one herself, one-sided and doomed. Yet here she was, in trouble, expecting Kimihito to be by her side.

The chorus was close. She lifted her voice an octave and then even higher in a dramatic key change, but as she did, she realized... *I can't do this.*

If her singing was going to come out as unseemly cracking and destroy her voice in the process, she would simply refuse to sing. She would stay behind the curtain and declare that the show was over. But just as she made her decision and let her voice trail off, something happened.

It started to rain.

“Wha?!”

“What’s this?!”

The bewildered shouts of the audience came through the curtain. The rain was restricted to the stage, of course, and the curtain kept them from getting wet, but they were still shocked at the sudden indoor storm. Rain wasn’t meant to fall on an indoor stage, after all. Mero herself was stunned for a moment, but as the chords leading up to the final chorus played, she raised her voice to coast on the melody.

There was no cracking or faltering; clear as fresh water she sang through the lines. Thanks to the sudden rain, her gills were damp, and she could breathe freely again. It felt like a blessing from heaven was sparkling down from somewhere in the ceiling.

Of course, what looked like a theater effect was really the fire sprinklers spraying down. The dramatic effect might have looked like part of the show, but it was something much simpler.

As the song came to an end, the sprinklers stopped, and Mero breathed a sigh of relief. But there was a touch of confusion there, too. “What *was* that?” she wondered aloud as she switched off her microphone.

How had the sprinklers turned on? Where was Kimihito?

“Oh, Beloved,” Mero whispered, putting the pieces together. She laid her hands over her heart. He’d been watching over her the entire time. Her sadness evaporated as pure joy swept through her.

“Waaah! Snookums, my costume ripped again!” Tio cried.

“Don’t worry, it’ll be fine, I’ll handle it. Where’s the tear?” Kimihito asked.

“Right over my chest!”

“Huh?!” Kimihito seared red.

They were back in the green room, and Tio was once again clinging to him in tears. This time, the costume had split along the center buttons, right between her breasts. Thanks to their height disparity, when her massive breasts were unleashed, they just narrowly missed a violent impact with his face.

He took a second to compose himself, then took out the sewing kit and assessed the damage. “All right...you’ll be returning this to the theater soon, won’t you? Wouldn’t it make sense to leave fixing this to the professionals?”

“Oh, no! ☆ They prepared these outfits specially for us, so they said we can keep them.”

Of course, it’s not like a human idol could use a costume tailored to fit Tio.

“Isn’t that great, Papi? ☆” Tio asked.

“Hooray! Boss can see my Papi dance whenever he wants!” Papi shouted.

“Yeah! Maybe when we get home you could show the rest of the girls your dance, too,” he said.

“Yaaay! Get ready for, err... How did it go again?” She tried to repeat the steps, but it seemed she’d already forgotten. All she could manage was spinning around and around.

She’ll get dizzy if she keeps at it... Kimihito was worried, but for the moment, his hands were tied, or maybe *laced*, as he mended Tio’s frilly costume. He couldn’t split his focus between them. He wove the needle in and out almost as fast as a sewing machine while trying not to look too closely at the bust looming over his face. “Okay, Tio, I’m done. The stitches aren’t that secure, though, so at some point you’ll need proper repairs to prevent another tear.”

“Really?” Tio asked. “Would you be able to handle those too, Snookums?”

“Of course.”

“Aww! ☆” Tio gave him a warm smile. “It’s a date! I’ll make lunch as a thank-you, and we can have a picnic.”

“That’d be, uh... It’s not that big a deal.”

“Hm? Why not?”

“It might be—” He thought back to a similar occasion when he’d been caught up in Tio’s healing aura. She’d made him feel so relaxed he couldn’t bring himself to leave...couldn’t even bring himself to want to. It made future invitations dangerously tempting. “—too much.”

“Awww!”

“Beloved?” came a voice from behind him.

“Ah, Mero,” Kimihito answered.

Mero, in her automatic wheelchair, had returned from drying her hair. “Thank you for assisting with the performance. The sprinklers were a lifesaver.”

“Your gills had dried out, right?”

“So you did realize.”

“Yeah, your voice sounded kinda off. Since I knew the spotlight could be really hot, I thought that might be the issue.”

“‘Elementary,’ my beloved! Your powers of observation are amazing. Thank you from the bottom of my heart.” She pressed her hands together with a smile.

He had detected the change in Mero’s voice and asked the director where the control panel for the sprinkler system was. He could have set them off manually by lighting a fire under the sensor, but that would have soaked the audience, so he went directly to the switchboard and activated just the sprinklers over the stage.

“I must admit, though, I’m surprised how easily you detected such a small change in my voice,” she said, looking a bit shy.

“Huh?” He tilted his head in confusion. “Well, I guess I’m always listening to your voice, so of course I’d notice when it changes, Mero.”

Mero was speechless. She hid her face in her hands and started to cough, painful and dry.

“M-Mero?! Are you all right?! Are your gills too dry?!” Kimihito checked her over in concern.

“N-no, I’m quite fine, just surprised that you’d be such a tease,” she said through her hands.

He tilted his head so far it seemed like it’d do a full rotation, unable to understand what she was talking about. He’d become so used to the forwardness of Miia and some of the other girls that Mero’s restrained shows of affection didn’t quite register with him.

“Ahem. Not to worry. Thank you again for all your help, Beloved. Your intervention meant I could do my job well.”

“Yeah.” He looked around the room. “Mero, Tio, Papi—you all did a great job!” They’d managed to work as idols for a day with no issues.

Papi was still spinning, though she was tilting and stumbling from dizziness, and Tio was worried enough about the repairs to her outfit that she was holding her chest in check, a breast cupped in each hand. Sure, there’d been problems, but the show had gone on.

“Anyway.” Kimihito looked back at Mero. “If it’s okay to say, you and your family don’t have any trouble with money, so did you really need to do the work program?”

“It was an important life experience! Besides...” She trailed off.

“Besides?”

Mero opened her mouth to continue, then thought better of it and covered it with both hands. “Nothing.”

“Huh?” Kimihito wasn’t used to her clamming up like this, and he was stunned for a moment. He was about to continue the interrogation, when—

“Um, Boss!” Papi chirped, until she was interrupted in turn. “Papi and everyone are—”

“Papi!” Mero said. “ANM48 are starting their concert soon. The director prepared seats, shall we go and watch?”

“Yeah? Yeah, yeah? Let’s do it!”

“Hey, wait!” While Kimihito was still gathering his wits, Mero and Papi had changed the topic. *Now that I think about it, Miia and Rachnera had some secret plan for their money, too...*

Their determination to earn money from these jobs, and the fact that they were clearly keeping something hidden from them—those two facts were clearly connected. What were the girls scheming? *They could be splitting the cost of something between them.* Although given the varied body types of each of the girls, it was hard to imagine an item they’d be able to share.

“Papi, let’s change our clothes before we head out,” Tio said.

“Right!” Papi agreed. She grabbed the hem of her dress with her clawed wings.

That slammed the emergency brake on Kimihito’s train of thought. “Whoa! Papi, wait! You can’t take that off here!” He fumbled to stop her.

“Huh? Why not?”

“Because *I’m* here!” he shouted, fleeing the room before she could continue.

Many liminals had different morals and levels of shame than humans, Papi included, and didn’t realize the discomfort they could cause by changing clothes in front of others—particularly others of another sex.

“Waaah! Mero, Papi’s wings are caught!” She shouted from beyond the door.

“Oh, goodness, whatever shall we do with you, Papi? Let me fix that,” came Mero’s voice.

“Remember to take good care of your outfit! ☆ If you’re not careful, it’ll rip like mine did,” Tio said.

It sounded pretty lively in there.

Kimihito could do nothing but wait, face red hot, until they were done changing. He’d been so distracted by the whole situation that he’d completely forgotten about the mystery of what everyone intended to buy with their pay. It seemed answers would have to wait for another day.

3 MAID
CENTOREA • MANAKO



IT'S NOT AN idol's outfit. It's not a waitress's, either. It has the lightness and frivolity of frills but the stately and dignified nature of a service uniform. It's easy to work in, of course, considering the original purpose of the clothing. Like so many other types of clothes imported to Japan, the Japanese people adapted it into their own unbeatable, sexy, adorable version. This is...the maid outfit.

And who wears maid outfits? Why, *maids*, of course.

This paragraph was framed outside the entrance of a backstreet maid café in a quieter corner of Akihabara. There was another sign labeling this establishment "Café Marsha." The paragraph posted outside was a special message from the owner, whose obsession with maids was clearly second to none.

Kimihito understood the owner's enthusiasm, but there was something important missing from the description. *What exactly is a maid?*

Café Marsha was a popular maid café in the Tokyo Metropolitan Area and the next place on the work pilot program schedule.

"Ah! A maid café. So, ballads, chivalry, damsels in distress?" Centorea inquired.

"I think it's a different type of maid." Though Kimihito couldn't be entirely sure with that signage.

"Guh," Manako said. "I am *so* nervous."

Today, Kimihito was escorting Centorea the centaur, also known as Cerea. The MON agent with them was Manako the cyclops, an elite sniper.

"Are you all right?" he asked her.

"I'm just fine," she clipped, unable to bring her voice above a whisper. "As long as you're here, Kimihito, I'll do my best." Manako clenched her fists and stared at him, her single eye glistening, though her tears seemed more desperate than determined.

Centorea, on the other hand, stood with her lips in a hard line and her eyes

focused. It was clear they were both extremely nervous, even if they expressed it differently. “Milord...we are both unlikely to show any skill at customer service. We lack the experience.”

“Aw, it’ll be fine. There’ll be veteran maids there to teach you how to serve the customers,” Kimihito said, “or at least, that’s what I was told.”

“Veterans? Then we shall be in reliable hands,” Cerea said, not looking especially comforted.

“They said to wait at the door until someone comes for us.” It would only be a moment, he was sure. Akihabara was famous as maid city, and anyone who’d worked in this competitive area for a while would be an expert at customer service.

“Welcome!” a loud voice greeted them as the door opened. Despite its volume, the accompanying shadow was very small.

“Hm?” Kimihito tilted his head. The voice was familiar, too.

“Congratulations on the pilot program! I think it’s awesome that liminals want to join the workforce and that you’re willing to put in the hours to prove you belong! I’m your maid supervisor, Ren Kunanzuki!” She took a deep breath. “I personally volunteered to look after you! Let’s all do our be—eeeh?!”

“Ah, y-you’re—!” Kimihito yelled at her familiar face.

“You—!” Ren replied.

Centorea was mute with astonishment.

“I knew one of the liminals would be bringing her host, but I didn’t think it’d be you, Kurusu-san,” Ren Kunanzuki said, shaking her pigtailed head as she gaped at him.

“Um, do you know her?” Manako asked, tilting her head. She’d missed out on meeting Ren previously.

“Manako,” Kimihito said, “this is Ren Kunanzuki. She’s...uh...she was part of Rachnee’s original host family.”

“Rachnera’s origi—oh!” Manako’s eye widened as she realized the significance. When Rachnera first arrived in Japan, she had been hosted by the

Kunanzuki family, including Ren. However, Rachnera accidentally hurt Ren, and the family decided she was too difficult to live with. They abandoned their duty as a host family and sold her to someone else. It'd been a shocking scandal and MON had gotten involved, so although Manako didn't recognize Ren's name, she certainly remembered the story.

"Does that mean...Rachnera-san will be here, too?" Ren asked, peering into the street behind them.

"Hm? No, Rachnee took a different assignment. It's just these two," Kimihito said.

"O-oh. I see." She gave a little sigh. There was relief in it but also some disappointment. Her feelings about Rachnera must be much more complex than the rest of her family's. Steeling herself, she spoke again. "Um...I would like to apologize for my actions when I came to your house. I caused a lot of trouble for you and your exchange group. I feel really bad about it."

"Huh?" The Kunanzuki family had sent Ren to Kimihito's house to ask for Rachnera's return. She'd been pushy about wanting to live with liminals but hadn't shown any consideration for *their* feelings or comfort, treating them like a difficult experience for her to brag about surviving later.

However, here she was, apologizing sincerely and sorrowfully. It seemed she'd learned a few lessons since then. "I thought about what you said, Kurusu-san, and I decided I'd get a customer service job to get some practice being polite. That's why I'm working here!"

"At a maid café."

"Yes! And I'm so good at it that when they needed a supervisor for the pilot program, the owner asked me! It's nice to meet you all, and I'll do my best as your teacher!"

"Oh ho," Centorea said, impressed. She may have made a poor first impression, but Ren was putting real effort into her personal improvement. If the vaunted maid cafés of Akihabara valued her service, she had to have come a long way from her old self, objectifying liminals as a source of suffering for her to overcome. She must have really taken the girls' advice to heart. "But there are so many customer service jobs you could have applied for. Why choose this

industry? This establishment?”

Ren looked aside and fidgeted with her skirt. “Um, well, uh...that outfit Mero-san loaned me was so frilly and—how could I possibly forget it?”

“What?”

“Nothing, nothing! It’s Centorea-san and Manako-san, right? Come on in. Let’s get those maid costumes on so I can teach you the basics of customer service.”

“Rgh.” Centorea bristled, remembering how nervous she’d been before the shock of running into Ren.

“Ah,” Manako said, seemingly feeling the same way. Both their expressions grew stiff and anxious. Did Ren really have enough experience to be an industry veteran? Even if she did, would she be a capable teacher?

“L-looking forward to your tutelage, Ren,” Centorea said, though she sounded doubtful.

“Yeah, leave it to me! I know everything there is to know. We got this!” She gave an energetic little jump and punched the air overhead. She’d clearly matured and gained some experience at the café, but communicating it was a whole ‘nother skill set. Would the girls be okay?

Kimihito looked across to Manako and Centorea, and a long silence passed between the three of them, anxiety written on all their faces. He felt like he had to encourage them, but before he could figure out what to say— “Ah! That’s right!” Ren clapped her hands. “Manako-san, you’ve got some backup from MON.”

“Backup?” Kimihito asked. He hadn’t heard anything about this backup. He looked at Centorea and Manako in turn, but they both shook their heads, as confused as he was.

“Yeah! They came to cheer you on,” Ren reiterated.

Manako was at a loss, her one large eye clouded over with doubt and confusion.

After they'd been at the café for about an hour, they began to practice the fundamentals of being a maid. Rule #1: Greet the customer the minute they enter.

"W-welcome to the shop, Master," Manako stammered, face completely red. She tugged at her short skirt to try and cover herself while her eye wavered with anxiety. She was trying her best to look at the customer and smile, even if she wasn't succeeding. "Th-thank you for your order, sir. Moé moé kyun. ≡" She made a heart with her hands and assumed the traditional maid pose.

"Whoooa! That was amazing, Manako-san!"

"Manako-san, now I've seen your maid outfit, I'm happy to die for the cause!"

The two human men she was posing for were the MON support they'd been promised.

After a crash course from Ren, Manako had changed into the maid outfit and started practice right away. That made the duo practice dummies of a sort. Not that they minded—they were so enthusiastic about this assignment that it made them seem young again.

"This is too embarrassing," Manako said.

"No way! It's awesome, Manako-san!"

"Even your embarrassment is cute! I don't know why you need to practice!"

They weren't receiving a bonus like she was—they were just that excited to see Manako in a maid outfit. She moaned and hid her face behind the tray she was holding.

Kimihito was seated at the next table, watching. The men's sharp suits struck a contrast with their behavior. In fact, they were wearing the same style of suit that Smith wore, which probably meant they were her colleagues. "Uh," he interrupted.

"Oh!" The shorter one straightened himself out. "Sorry about that, Kimihito-kun, we might have gone overboard."

"D-don't worry about it. We haven't met, have we?"

"No, no." He bowed his head, and the other followed. "I work at the Office of

Interspecies Cultural Exchange. Code name: Salmon.”

“I too am an employee of the Office of Interspecies Cultural Exchange. Code name: Double Two One,” the taller agent said, “but, please, call me Dubtwo.” He stood out as much more built than his coworker.

The two of them, given their excitement, were clearly big Manako fans, but as they handed Kimihito their business cards, they transformed into serious civil servants.

“Nice to meet you. I’m Kurusu Kimihito. Are you, uh, Smith-san’s subordinates?”

“Essentially, yes. The government is still developing its approach to liminals, so our function and workload varies. At the moment we get stuck wi—err, *assigned*—almost any job related to them.”

“Our specific role is supporting the actual field members of MON, like Manako-san and her team.”

They both bowed their heads again.

Kimihito only really saw Smith, who was his personal Cultural Exchange Coordinator, and the field members of MON. But of course there would be other government agents involved—as many roles as there were liminals in the program. It was thanks to their efforts that liminals like his girls could experience Japan safely.

“We owe you, Kimihito-kun, for taking on this craz—this *sudden*—request.”

“Yeah, we were at a total loss how to get the test cases done otherwise.”

So even Smith’s own employees though she asked too much.

“Thanks again for all your help!”

“Yeah, and we’ll help you out here in return, to make sure Manako-san does okay.”

Salmon and Dubtwo finished summarizing the situation with broad, gleaming smiles.

With two government employees in the mix, Kimihito assumed there

wouldn't be any trouble this time around. Or rather, he'd started to wonder whether he was even needed today. Ren was also here, advising Manako and Cerea from the back, and though he had concerns about her as a person, she'd already shown she was a reliable maid. *Everything seems under control*, he thought.

"By the way, Kimihito-kun!" Dubtwo called.

"Hm?"

"About Manako's uniform..." Salmon continued.

They both pointed at her.

"Isn't that shy smile, serving customers despite her embarrassment, totally perfect?"

"Not that I don't love her sniper outfit, but with all those frills, the maid outfit is something else!"

"One-eyed girls are the best!" When it came to Manako, they immediately lost their professionalism. He couldn't come up with a good response, and Manako seemed upset, too.

"I-I'm sorry about them," she said to him. "They just—they get distracted when I'm around."

"They're just being fanboys, right?" He didn't understand the appeal himself, but they seemed fixated on her single eye.

Overhearing the word "fan," the men nodded agreeably.

"No way, that's impossible!" Manako shouted, simultaneously adamant and disappointed.

Kimihito was surprised she'd try to deny it, considering how open they were about their feelings.

"I'm unreliable. They're just here because Ms. Smith was worried that I'd mess up. Look, I can't even wear the outfit right. It's super weird on me."

"That's not true at all," he replied without hesitation. "It looks great on you."

"Ah...th-thank you very much." She continued hiding her face with the tray,

but her grip relaxed a little as his reassurance sank in. As she lowered it slightly, her smile seemed more genuine. “Am I really going to be okay at customer service? Won’t I scare people?”

From the kitchen, where she was wiping some cups clean, Ren yelled, “Don’t worry about it!!” She’d been listening in on them the whole time. “The owner sent a text to our regulars saying we’d have a cyclops and a centaur on shift today, so everyone who comes by will be here to see you two! Or at least to see liminal maids!”

“Ahhh,” Manako sighed, “I-I guess I should thank you.” She gripped tighter on the tray again, her eye welling with tears.

Even the owner of the café seemed dependable; they hadn’t shown their face, but they’d managed to sort out the customers, the support, and the training. Ren’s voice came from deep within the kitchen: “We’re gonna be busy today! It’ll be packed!”

“Don’t worry, Manako-san. Because of the ongoing cultural exchange between our worlds, the discrimination against cyclopeans has sharply decreased. Furthermore: this is Akihabara! It’s at the forefront of cultural change, and locals can find ‘moé’ in anything. In fact one-eye moé has been around for ages,” Salmon said.

“That’s right! None of these customers will be scared,” Dubtwo added.

“I’ll be in the kitchen, so the floor’s all yours, Manako-san and Centorea-san,” Ren said nonchalantly as she leaned over the counter.

“Wh-what?!” Manako gasped.

Ren balled up her fist and grinned. “You’ll be fine! Just don’t forget the warm hospitality I taught you earlier. You’ve done the coursework, now it’s exam time!!” If any trouble arose she’d probably intervene, but until then, it seemed she’d be spectating from the other side of the divider. This was too much tough love in Kimihito’s opinion, but he kept quiet. Ren tended to be harsh on herself, so it made sense she’d apply the same standards to others, whether she realized it or not.

“O-okay. *Okay*. Don’t forget...hospitality...” Manako said to herself.

“We’ll be cheering you on, Manako,” Kimihito said.

“This is an important duty... I’ll do my best!” She was serious to her core, but she was also very receptive to their support. Her shyness faded as she found the resolve to do her job. If she could survive the kind of action MON got into, she could survive this.

“Besides—” Kimihito was interrupted by a figure emerging from the changing room.

“Master,” Centorea greeted him, now in the same style of maid outfit as Manako.

Centaur women were large, and while they’d made a blouse to accommodate her figure, they’d underestimated just how big her bust was. It looked like she’d burst the buttons if she breathed too hard. Her horse-like lower half was hidden inside a voluminous skirt. When Kimihito did her laundry, he sometimes mistook her regular skirts for blackout curtains. This maid skirt, made of much finer fabric, could’ve been a curtain in a Western manor instead.

One agent began, “Manako’s a regular girl other than the eye, but Centorea needed her clothes custom-made—”

“—so we had the MON outfitters sew it from scratch,” the second agent finished. Kimihito wondered what MON’s paramilitary outfitters thought of being asked to make a maid outfit, but it would’ve been impossible to source otherwise, so he was relieved it’d been taken care of.

“Er, Milord,” she said, “what say you?” She looked composed, but her blush gave her away.

“It’s great, Cerea,” he said with a smile.

“A-are you certain? I fear I am unsuited to this style of garment.” She adjusted her arms to keep from bursting out of the blouse.

“Hmm? Yeah?” Her movements were distracting. The more she fussed with the blouse, the more attention she called to her jiggling breasts.

“Um, Miss Centorea,” Manako said, “I’m embarrassed by the outfit too, so let’s just focus on the job together, okay?”

“C-certainly. It’s for the sake of interspecies cultural exchange—we sacrifice our dignity to a noble cause.” She nodded in assent, duty-driven as ever.

Manako made another attempt at forming a heart with her hands. “Moé—moé—kyun—! ≡”

“M-moé...” Centorea’s fingers trembled as she made her own attempt. “Moé...moé...” Actually, her whole body was shaking. “Moé, moé—moé, moé—rrrgh, I refuse!” She gave in and threw her hands over her face.

Through them, she continued to speak. “I cannot allow myself to perform such weak, childish movements! Augh!!”

“W-weak?” Manako spluttered.

“Not to imply that you are weak, Manako—”

“No, it’s okay, I’m kind of a coward.”

“The trouble is how foolish I feel, failing to perform such a simple motion. This ‘moé,’ it vexes me!”

“It really is terrible,” Manako anxiously agreed.

Both of them looked to Kimihito, their reliable chaperone.

“Hmm,” he said. If they couldn’t handle a simple “moé moé kyun ≡,” there was no chance of them completing the maid job. Manako was close to getting it, but Centorea’s failure was making them both nervous and putting the whole day at risk.

More than that, though, Centorea was falling into despair. Her tail and ears sagged, and it was impossible not to feel bad for her. Kimihito had to do *something* to help. “F-for now, why not try out the rest of the menu?” He grabbed around for it.

“The rest of—the menu?” Manako asked.

“Right, uh, like—” As Kimihito fumbled, Salmon came to the rescue with the main menu sheet, while Dubtwo provided the special menu. There was a highlighted listing for The Maid’s Ketchup Omurice. “Why don’t you try this one?”

Salmon and Dubtwo nodded energetically.

Manako and Centorea looked at each other, then reached a decision. Cerea scrutinized Kimihito with a sharp expression, and Manako turned her eye over to him. In unison, they gave him a nod.

“Well, here we go.” Manako clutched the ketchup bottle in her hand.

There were two plates of omurice on the table, one each for Salmon and Dubtwo. She stood in front of them, anxious, and Kimihito swore he heard her gasp for breath.

The special omurice served at the café was the kind where, in front of the customer, a maid would draw a heart on in ketchup. It was such a common service that there was a specific kind of ketchup, thinner and easier to draw with, that everyone in the industry used. That didn’t make it *easy*, though. Kimihito had tried and failed before while cooking at home.

“Okay...like this...and...”

“Whooooa!” the MON members cried out in unison.

Manako had taken her time to get it right, and the result was perfect. But it wasn’t a heart—it was a picture of a single, large eye. It wasn’t clear whether she did it to show her personal style or just because she found the heart too embarrassing. Pleased with the result, she gave a slightly bashful smile. “Hee hee.”

Salmon and Dubtwo gazed reverently at the plate, as if it were the face of God on their omurice and they were preparing to worship it.

“Beautifully done,” Kimihito said. He felt a little awed, too.

The lines were uniform and unsmudged, showing just how precise she’d been with the ketchup bottle. “Th-thank you very much. Complicated designs are my passion. I even assemble and disassemble my own guns.”

“Oh, I see,” Kimihito said. It was tough to imagine at the moment, with her standing in front of him in a maid outfit, but thinking back to her appearances with the MON team... Of course a sniper would be in charge of her own rifle,

and she had the fastidious personality for both tasks.

“Mmm, it’s *too* delicious!”

“Yes! I’m having a religious experience!”

The MON agents cried into their omurice as they ate. It seemed they had attained Manako-nirvana.

“Nice going, Manako,” said Kimihito. “They’ve transcended.”

“Oh. H-honestly, Miss Ren made the omurice. I just drew on it.”

“Yeah, but that’s what really mattered to them, I think.”

“Hm. Thank you. Shall I draw on yours, too?” she asked.

It was a kind suggestion, but, “Cerea is doing mine.”

“Oh, that’s right! Miss Centorea, how are you doing?” Manako looked over at her.

“Err.” Centorea stood at the neighboring table, ketchup bottle in hand. At first it looked like she was doing the same thing as Manako, but as she struggled to get the ketchup onto Kimihito’s omelet, he noticed her expression and swallowed hard. The look on her face was *terrifying*, the complete opposite of what anyone who ordered the special maid service would expect. “Hrrrgh. A heart, you say?” she managed through gritted teeth.

“Don’t worry about it, Cerea. if that’s too difficult, you can draw something easier.”

“I *refuse*! I am Centorea Shianus! Milord ordered a heart omelet, and I will perform my duty and make him proud! No mere foodstuff can stop me!”

“Sure, but—”

She totally ignored his interjection. It was obvious from her grip that she was holding the bottle too tight and in the wrong place. Unless she relaxed, she would never get anything out of there, let alone draw with it. “O-of course, drawing a heart is childish, far beneath my station, but if it is part of a maid’s duty, I must do so nonetheless! My pride as a centaur is on the line!”

“Okay, do your best,” he sighed.

Centorea's hands shook as she adjusted the bottle to draw the left side of the heart. She could swing a (fake) sword with ease, but whether from inexperience or her condescending attitude toward the task, she couldn't get the ketchup technique right. "H-here I go!" she shouted.

Splorch.

With her tight hold on the bottle, it was bound to happen... The ketchup splattered messily all over the plate.

"Ahh?!" she yelped, but she didn't stop squeezing; the ketchup splatter widened and spread onto the table. Easing her grip—as if that would help *now*—the bottle slipped from her hands. "Ah!" It rebounded from the edge of the table, the cap flying off, and turned end over end in the air—towards Kimihito.

He saw it arc toward him like it was in slow motion. The bottle trailing ketchup, and him, too busy watching to think of getting away— "Bwuh!" A direct hit to the face. His vision went completely red, and all he could smell was tomato. It dripped from him like blood from a head wound.

"Aaaaah! Milord! My deepest apologies!!" Centorea screamed in despair, and the sound echoed through the café.

Ren led Kimihito into the break room, where he tried to wipe away the mess with a damp towel. Unfortunately, wiping just spread it further without really removing any, which meant he wouldn't be clean until he got home and showered.

Luckily, Salmon had some replacement clothes with him. Why he'd brought them was a mystery. When asked, he said that an Interspecies Coordinator needed to be prepared for anything. Maybe it was just standard protocol.

"I sincerely apologize for this, Milord." Centorea had trailed after him to make sure he was okay.

"No, seriously, it's fine."

"Thank you, but it was an unacceptable blunder, and I must find a way to atone," she asserted.

“It’s just a little ketchup! Don’t worry about it.”

Still, she had such a long face. “I am unfit for this industry.”

“Hmmm.” It was close to their opening time—this was the type of café that was only open in the afternoons. If they didn’t hurry, Centorea would be stuck working with real customers without any more practice. He’d thought Ren could help with some special training, but as long as Centorea was worked up like this, he wasn’t sure how to suggest it to her.

“What kind of a knight,” she said, “is incapable of a simple task like this? I can’t do a single part of this job to satisfaction. On top of that, I caused you trouble, Milord! Today is *irredeemable*.”

“Don’t say that, Cerea.” He shook his head. Centorea tended to catastrophize, but this was worse than usual. If she kept beating herself up, she’d completely crush her own spirit. But how could he stop her from doing that? He lowered his voice and spoke as gentle as he could. “Hey, everybody’s got skills and problem areas. If the café isn’t a good fit, we can ask Ms. Smith to find a different work placement.”

“Oh, Milord.” She looked at him with complete relief, but midway through her nod of agreement, she stopped herself short. “I couldn’t possibly do that.”

“Huh?”

“Miia, Rachnera, Papi, and Mero have performed admirably. I refuse to be the only failure.”

“W-well, I mean, but—” Centorea’s self-serious personality was usually charming, but right now, her inflexibility was the source of all her problems. If she kept putting pressure on herself to perform perfectly as a maid, she would make similar mistakes when she actually started serving. “Hmm.” Was there no solution?

As he looked around the back room for inspiration, he noticed the door had swung slightly ajar. It seemed someone was peering in—a certain someone with a single, large eye.

“Just a sec. I’ve gotta go ask someone a question,” Kimihito excused himself and went for the door.

“Hm? Yes, take your leave,” Centorea said.

Kimihito left the room and found Manako standing outside.

“Ah—!” Manako startled.

“Shhh.” He pressed a finger to his mouth, gesturing for her to be quiet. If she’d been trying to hide, she hadn’t put much effort in.

“I’m sorry, I was just...worried about Miss Centorea,” she sighed.

“Thanks. I’m sure she’d appreciate it normally, but at the moment, she’s pretty upset. Let’s not push her, okay?”

Manako nodded. “I thought she’d appreciate some help with the ketchup, but of course it was a bad idea.”

“Come on, you know that’s not true. It was a kind gesture. She’s just sensitive that she’s struggling when you’re doing well—”

“No, it’s because I’m serving people I already know. As soon as there are strangers...” She frowned at her lack of self-confidence.

Due to her one-eyed nature, Manako was met with a lot of fear when she first arrived in Japan, but she built a life for herself and persevered—up to and including this attempt at being a maid. “I think it’s incredible the amount of effort you’ve put into this,” he said.

“What? No, no, I’m no good. My social anxiety just keeps getting in the way.” She lowered her head to hide her face. “That’s part of why I don’t think we should push Miss Centorea too hard. Everyone has things they’re bad at, you know?”

He nodded. “You’re not wrong...” Centorea’s stubbornness made her reluctant to admit her mistakes, which meant she wouldn’t get help, which meant she would repeat them over and over. How could they stop her from spiraling? “Hmm.”

“Sir?”

“But if you don’t keep trying the stuff you’re bad at, you’ll never improve.”

“Well, sure.”

Centorea's personality wasn't suited to playing a maid, but she *did* do a lot of acting; the knight routine was mostly a performance. Unlike Ren, who pursued impossible challenges and somehow overcame them, Centorea was the kind of masochist who'd throw herself on the sword and stay there. Which meant they needed to change the obstacle in front of her to something she *could* get past.

"Hey, Manako, your maid outfit—do you like that style of clothes?" Kimihito asked, formulating a plan.

"Hm? It's a bit too frilly, but I do like wearing cute stuff." She pushed the petticoats down absently.

"So it's not distracting you from your work."

She tilted her head at him uncomprehendingly, her eye opening wide.

"Maybe we should let Cerea do the job in her own style?"

"*Oh.*" Now Manako got it. "I see."

The back room, typically for Akihabara, had a lot of different reading material scattered around. Doujinshi—the self-published books endemic to the area—filled the shelves, an exhaustive list of popular fetishes and interests. Surely, somewhere in those...

"Manako, give us a few minutes. I'll figure something out for her," Kimihito said decisively.

"That sounds like magic. What're you going to do?" she asked.

"I'm not a hundred percent sure," he said, scratching his head bashfully, "but I've got a few ideas." Despite the hazy details, his voice had a certain conviction to it. "This might just work out."

"Hail fellow, well met!"

The two men waiting outside the café doors were startled by the boisterous voice that greeted them.

"Uh...?"

"A centaur in a maid outfit—or, wait, not quite...?"

It made sense that they were confused. Centorea stood at the door in an altered costume, with a silver cuirass strapped across her chest and a fake sword slung at her side. Under close scrutiny, it was obvious the armor was also fake, but it was well made enough to make the right initial impression. As the customers gaped at her, she announced, “I am Centorea, and while I normally serve as a knight, today I am sworn to this maid café! For reasons.”

“So you’re, like, a female knight? A...knight-maid?”

“Wow, her acting’s on point.”

“I am not an actor!” she insisted. She’d been having this conversation since the start of the shift. The armor came courtesy of Salmon and Dubtwo, who’d somehow found a set at short notice. “A chivalric heart beats strong inside me, and when I return from this post to Milord’s side, the hardships endured here will have strengthened it further.” She gazed hard at the customers.

“O-oh,” one of them stammered.

“Her sense of duty is so inspiring!” cheered the other.

“Come, let me serve you! Let us proceed to your assigned seating.” With a dramatic sweep of her arm, she invited them inside. She was every bit the accommodating maid but with her own special twist.

From the corner, Kimihito watched Centorea work. Salmon and Dubtwo had taken the next table over. “That armor could be in a movie,” he whispered, trying to keep a low profile without knowing why.

“Thank you—but of course, it’s actually cardboard.”

“We got the pattern from a cosplay magazine, copied it at a larger size, and then sprayed it silver. Akihabara’s got everything.” According to Dubtwo, the spray paint used for plastic models could make anything look metal with just one coat, and dried fast.

“It’s made really well,” Kimihito said.

“There’s a trick to it—”

“—We got a lot of practice at work!”

They laughed in unison. What on Earth did Smith have her agents doing?

The sword itself was a dull metal display sword she carried daily to “protect” Kimihito. Somehow, it had finally come in handy.

“Thanks to your help, Cerea seems like she’s actually having fun,” he said.

“We barely did anything.”

“Yeah, the whole maid-knight idea was yours. Don’t sell yourself short.”

“Can I really take credit for that?” He wore a pained smile. “That’s just how she acts all the time.” His thinking had been: if she couldn’t play the role of a traditional maid, there must be another type of maid she could be instead. Thanks to Akihabara’s unusual tastes, he’d found the perfect option. After all, lots of maid cafés had secondary themes they used to stand out, and there would always be customers who liked a change from the norm. The break room here had tons of doujin about female knight characters.

“—should our guests prefer, we also have this option—”

Of course, most of those doujin followed a formula, one he didn’t think would go down well with Centorea: the knight would be captured by enemies who did lewd and indecent things to her. They’d still been useful inspiration, especially since several of them featured the theme of a female knight doubling as a maid. He’d shown her an example of the trope to help her understand what he was suggesting. After looking at it, she agreed that since she acted as a knight in her daily life, it wouldn’t be too hard to be a knight-maid instead.

“—summoned me, traveler? Prithee, speak, and I shall take note of your order.” Centorea stopped at the table on the other side of Kimihito. As she went through the menu with them, her mannerisms were different from the standard maid, but they fit in just fine with the wild spirit of Akihabara.

When they pitched the concept to Ren, she agreed that allowing each maid some individuality could be a hook for some customers. Everyone was on board.

Salmon and Dubtwo watched Centorea and nodded.

“Now that’s what I call a female knight.”

“Stiff, awkward, and eager to serve? She’s the ideal!”

Kimihito wasn't sure *why* that was ideal, but he breathed a sigh of relief.

"Two iced coffees? Very well. Please be patient." She finished with the customers and made her way over to Kimihito, an uneasy look on her face. "Milord," she said to him, "is this *truly* permissible? I feel as if I'm taking too high-handed a stance with the customers. It is completely unlike what Ren demonstrated to us."

"Think of it like a concept café! She did give us the okay, remember?"

"'Tis true..." She didn't relax at all.

Salmon and Dubtwo leaned in.

"Have you heard of the tsundere café? People come from all across the city just to get insulted by those cute girls! There's a café for every taste."

"Even if your speech *is* overbearing, Centorea-dono, it's what suits you. People think you're putting on a character."

"It is not a character, though!" she shouted.

Kimihito smiled. "It's fine. Just keep being yourself," he said.

"Y-yes. You've been quite clear." Centorea nodded and trotted off to the kitchen.

The customers watched her go with unwavering gazes. They didn't just stare at her face but also her armor and her horse-like hind quarters.

"Centaurs are great, huh?"

"Here's hoping someone opens a dedicated monster girl café."

"I wanna see a bunch of them. A café for every type!"

"Yeah, monster girls are the best!"

Unsurprisingly, liminal girls were popular with this crowd. Through Smith, Kimihito had learned that there were a lot of people who wanted to host them, and as a host himself, he could understand the appeal.

"U-um, excuse me!" Suddenly Manako's voice lifted above the rest. He looked up and saw her turning toward him with a teary eye. Salmon and Dubtwo readied themselves, leaning forward and preparing to leap to her aid. "There's a

problem!”

“What’s the matter?” Kimihito asked.

“People keep asking for pictures!” she said.

“Huh?” He surveyed the crowd and discovered many of them were watching her with phones at the ready.

“I...I’ve just never been asked for them before! Is it okay? Are there policies I need to follow?”

“It’s fine! Go get ‘em, Manako!” Ren called from the kitchen with an encouraging gesture.

Manako continued to cry, but now it seemed to be from relief—maybe even joy. It was unlikely that anyone had ever asked to take a picture with her before.

Salmon and Dubtwo seemed moved, too.

“Here I thought they’d never see the charm of the cyclopean!” said Salmon.

“Her future’s so bright, we oughtta make her shades!” said Dubtwo.

Their own eyes filled with tears.

It was a mystery to Kimihito why they were so invested, but he couldn’t dwell on it, because Manako was shivering with anxiety. He had to intervene. “Hey, could I take the pictures?” he asked.

“Wh-what?! But you’re meant to be relaxing!” Manako said.

“It’s no trouble. Besides, I’m sure you’d like a familiar face there for your photo debut.”

“Th-thank you so much!” She was more obvious about it, but they were both relieved. He’d felt weird sitting around with nothing to do. It would be a genuine pleasure to help Manako navigate her newfound popularity.

“We can’t just sit and watch,” said Salmon, “we gotta get in line, too.”

“Yeah,” said Dubtwo, “it’s not like we’ve ever had the chance to be in a photo with her! This is an incredible opportunity for her two biggest fans.”

They clenched their fists passionately and rose to their feet.

“Aren’t you her coworkers?” Kimihito asked.

“It’s Maid Manako, though! That’s an SSR Manako variant!”

“Yeah! Plus, she’s normally with Zombina-san and Doppel-san! They’re so scar—so *close* to her that they’d get in the way if we tried!”

Any excuse to get that photo, huh?

Kimihito readied an instant camera as fast as he could. It was a simple point-and-shoot, no settings to mess with, so he felt up to the task.

As she settled into position, Manako gave him a shy smile. “Thank you very much.”

If that’s how she smiles for this, she’ll hit the top of the popularity rankings in no time, thought Kimihito as he took the first shot.

Sooner than anyone expected, the day was over. Just as the sun finished setting, they (politely) shooed out the last customer and locked the door. Centorea and Manako both collapsed from exhaustion.

“Zounds...” gasped Centorea.

“I’m so sorry, Miss Centorea. There was such a demand for pictures I couldn’t come back to the floor,” said Manako.

“Not to worry, Manako, it was work all the same. And my, how many customers it drew!”

The maid café’s atmosphere was much less calm and *much* less adult than the bar’s. As soon as word got out about the centaur and cyclops maids, one day only, there was a rush on the place. They’d been swarmed.

Salmon and Dubtwo gave the girls a standing ovation.

“Thanks for the amazing effort, you two,” Kimihito said as he reentered the room, “I got you some drinks.”

“Milord! That’s excessive! You’ve done too much already.”

“It’s your turn to be taken care of.” He smiled and set a cup of vegetable juice in front of her, then a mug of hot cocoa for Manako.

“Thank you so much, Kimihito!” Manako said.

“That was a lot of hard work,” he remarked.

“On your part, too,” she insisted, “And now, these drinks...”

“It’s the least I can do,” he said with a dismissive wave.

“Thanks for giving it your all!” Ren shouted as she burst out of the kitchen. “For first timers, you did super well! We were so busy that I couldn’t set foot out of the kitchen! If I could, I’d hire you full-time!” Her volume didn’t waver.

“Alas, duty compels me home,” Centorea said.

Manako winced. “My feet hurt so much.”

“Yeah! Customer service, huh? Anyway, I’ll let the boss know you did great!” She slapped her chest for emphasis.

When Kimihito and Ren first met, he’d been worried about her future, but it seemed like the café had improved her social skills a lot. At this rate, she might be able to have a casual conversation with Rachnera sometime soon. He hoped so, anyway.

“And we’ll report to Smith-san on a job well done,” Salmon and Dubtwo said. Though they’d spent a lot of the afternoon as customers and fans, they’d been a huge help to Kimihito too, especially with the armor.

He bowed to them silently.

Centorea had been leaning, fatigued, on a table, but some life sparked back into her and she rose to her feet. “Oh, yes, Milord!”

“What’s up, Cerea?”

“May I attempt the special menu omurice again for you? To redeem myself.”

“R-really? Even though you’re supposed to be done?”

She clenched her fist, armor shining, and stared resolutely at him.

“Um! I’d like to try, too,” Manako said, nervously raising her hand.

“Both of you?!”

“I made some for the MON employees, but not for you, and I want to repay you for all your help...if that makes sense?”

Kimihito considered. “I see.”

The two maids watched intently, hands clasped over their breasts, as they awaited his answer.

“Well, if you’re sure, I can’t say no, can I?” he said.

“Milord! I will craft the finest omurice in all the land!” Centorea proclaimed.

“Miss Centorea, let’s not get too excited,” Manako said.

“Y-yes. You are correct, of course. Calm, calm...”

“Okay—on three. One, two, three...”

“Moé! Moé! Kyun~! ≡”

The maids made their way into the kitchen. Though they’d closed and tidied, it was probably okay for them to use it a little.

Ren had no problem, at least. “Sure, go ahead. We didn’t get any breaks, so they’ve definitely earned the right to mess around a bit.”

Hmmm... thought Kimihito. The two liminal girls seemed happy, but Cerea’s sudden insistence on cooking was odd. *In fact, everyone’s been acting weird about the work experience pilot program. Miia, Rachnera, Papi, and Mero, too.* But no matter how much he thought about it, he couldn’t figure out the reason.

Centorea in particular took on a lot of pressure, worrying about her performance when it didn’t have any bearing on how much she’d get paid. *When this is all over, I’ll have to ask her why.*

“Milord, dinner is served.” She approached with the omurice balanced on her palm like a waitress, which she basically was. Placing it in front of him, she braced herself. “W-well. Now for the maid ketchup.”

“Miss Centorea, shall we do it together?” Manako placed her hands over Centorea’s to steady them.

“You have my thanks, Manako.” Her nervousness seemed to abate somewhat.

Now that she wasn’t so tense, she was able to draw a beautiful, even line of red ketchup over the golden yellow omelet. With Manako easing them around the corners, the curves didn’t wobble. In the end, a perfect heart shape was drawn over the omurice.

“I—I did it, Milord!”

“Y-yeah—I’m kind of embarrassed,” Kimihito replied.

“Wait a moment, Miss Centorea!” Manako said. “We have to deliver the line!”

“Ah! How foolish of me to forget. Are you ready, Lady Manako?”

They lifted the plate and looked Kimihito straight in the eyes.

“Milord—”

“Kimihito—”

“Here’s your meal! Moé moé kyun~! ≡”

Of course, it goes without saying that the omurice they made together was the best Kimihito had ever tasted.

4

DEALER

POLT • DRACO • KII • LILITH



THEY'D BEEN SUMMONED to a café in the Tokyo area by Polt, a kobold woman. "Mr. Kurusu Kimihito! I hear you're helping out with the work program?" Polt had a fluffy layer of brown fur over her body, and her head was topped with two pointy ears. Her eyes were large and round, and her body was well sculpted. She usually wore tight athletic clothes that let her move around easily, but for the moment, she was hidden in a coat with a flipped-up collar and a pair of unflattering sunglasses. It was obvious she was avoiding someone, and it made Kimihito uncomfortable sitting near her.

"How do you *hear* this stuff so fast, Polt-san?" he asked.

"Heh heh, my company's always expanding into new areas, so I never lack for information! It's great that you're helping the government develop better opportunities for liminal employment. So kindhearted!"

Kimihito thought Smith had been pushing the girls too hard, but hearing someone from outside complimenting the program, he didn't feel like he could say that.

"I'm wondering if you could help *me* out, too," Polt said.

"With what?" He tilted his head. Was this related to her shady disguise?

"Like I said, my company's looking at new business developments—"

"How...proactive."

Kobold Industries provided a variety of health and well-being services for liminal people, particularly gyms. They also ran volunteer services to boost their reputation. They were a very wealthy species, but most of that seemed to go towards positive enterprises in the liminal community. Really, Kimihito wondered if he should be complimenting Polt, instead of the other way around.

"This is totally different from our usual trade. An absolute first of its kind! We've made some blunders during setup, but now..." She looked at him eagerly.

"Hm?" He waited for her to continue.

"It's ready for focus group testing!"

“Okay?” He tilted his head further. Polt had invited Miia and the rest to try out her gym before. She’d shown them through herself, giving demos of the state-of-the-art training equipment and shouting her way through the special training options.

“I’m not comfortable with this particular business move, personally.”

“Wait, what?”

“It’s kind of...immoral, I guess? Too hedonistic for me,” she said thoughtfully.

The gears turned in Kimihito’s head. “Is this ‘new business’...illegal?”

“Illegal?! Whoa, no way! In fact, *the government* told us to set it up!”

“The government?”

“Some branch came and asked for—ah, whatever, I’m just gonna come out and say it.” She leaned over the table, lowered her sunglasses, and whispered to him, “They asked us to build a casino.”

“Oh!” There it was! In fact, the prefectural governor had been in the news recently, saying a casino could bring tourists to the area and boost their economy. Was that who Polt’s company was involved with? How’d they get caught in a huge story like that?

“It’s not clear which municipality it’s for, but we’re the only liminal company with the know-how to make it happen, so they could be from anywhere. If we succeed, we’ll make a lot of money. It seemed too good to be true, so of course, they tacked on other conditions—”

It wasn’t just the kobolds standing to make a profit. This could be complicated. “Such as?”

“We’ve gotta staff it exclusively with liminals—by liminals, for humans. It’s aimed at Japan for now, but if it’s successful we’ll advertise internationally, too,” she said.

“I see.”

“I’m really struggling here. Is it even right for my company to build a casino? Especially like this!” She gripped the fur on the sides of her face and groaned. “It’s like, we make money to invest it back in the community. Carefully, steadily,

healthily, building funds to support the people. That's our mission statement! A casino's kind of the opposite of that."

"You seem pretty conflicted, Polt-san."

"It's not what kobolds are about. We're having trouble at every stage. But we've taken the contract, so we've gotta deliver." It seemed she wasn't alone in her problems. The way she was struggling reminded Kimihito of how he felt whenever Smith brought him an assignment. "Which brings us back to our first topic."

He refocused on her. "Sure."

"We've established a provisional location, but we still haven't figured out, uh, what the appeal is meant to be. So! I wondered if you could come by and tell us what the pros and cons are, then we'll implement the feedback as we iterate on the concept!"

"M-me?" he asked, baffled.

"You've helped with so many jobs already—bartender, idol, maid café—you've gotta be an expert on service and entertainment! If you come by and tell us what you think, it'll be a huge help. Whaddaya say?"

Kimihito was concerned. Even without the pilot program, he was stretched thin every day with housework. He still had Suu and Lala's assignment to attend. But Polt seemed really troubled—seeing her with her ears down, her smile and optimism gone, was getting to him. "Of course, if you'll have me," he said.

"Thanks so much! That makes you our first official tester!" Her grin returned in an instant.

"Um. Great." He looked around the quiet café she'd chosen. "Hey, why'd we meet *here*, anyway?"

"Oh, right." She looked, too. "It's to keep this a secret from the girls. Whatever the prefecture says, it's gambling, and this is Japan. Of course, you'll be monitoring a test with no actual money—yet."

"I see."

“You’re just a regular citizen, Kimihito, but the girls are studying abroad, and being caught at a casino might reflect poorly on them. Miss Smith would take issue with it for sure. This should stay between us,” she said.

“Of course. I understand.” Whether because of the optics or immigration, if the girls were seen gambling, it would cause a lot of problems for everyone. Plus, with how impulsive some of them were, they’d inevitably lose a lot of money. Miia and Centorea seemed like they’d be particularly bad gamblers. Rachnera and Suu had amazing poker faces, so they might be surprisingly good, though. Mero would probably do okay, and Lala... Who knew with Lala? It was hard to imagine her gambling at all, but if she did, he doubted it would go well.

“All right. When’s the test starting?” he asked.

“Let’s see...” Polt said, “that’d be tonight!”

This happened way too fast, Kimihito thought as he made his way to the casino—despite his bewilderment at being put in this situation. He’d been directed to an address inside the Tokyo area, a shopping district where the sky was crowded out by neon signs. He’d never heard of a casino around here. *Hope the girls are all right at home*. He’d arrived back from his meeting with Polt, made dinner for them, and then rushed back out. Since he couldn’t tell them about the casino, he lied that he’d needed to run an errand.

Miia had seen him off with a smile. “See you later, Darling! I’ve got this under control. Ooh, I feel like a newlywed seeing her husband off. Bye!!” Her tail waved as she spoke. At least she’d been in a good mood.

“Is this the place?” he asked himself aloud. He stood at a large building right in the center of the district. There were no signs to indicate what kind of business it was, and the windows were closed and covered, preventing anyone from seeing inside.

He double-checked the address before entering. The doorway was large and dark, like the entrance to an ancient, ruined castle, while the door itself had gold-plated handles. Two tall men in suits stood at attention, one bearded and one clean-shaven.

Intimidated by the scene, Kimihito took a moment to speak. “E-excuse me—”

The bearded man glared at him.

“Polt-san invited me to—”

“Ah. Kurusu-sama. We’ve been waiting.” His attitude swiftly changed at the mention of Polt’s name. Tension gone, he and the clean-shaven man both gave polite bows. “Welcome to Kobold Casino. Have a good time.”

“Who are you, by the by?” Kimihito asked.

“Normally? Polt’s translator when she’s traveling abroad. Today, though, I’m acting as security.”

“That sounds difficult.”

“Of course not. Anything for Polt,” he said with a little chuckle. He must have been a competent man for Polt to take him overseas with her.

Kimihito bowed to the translator and continued past.

“Welcome to the Kobold Casino!”

A chorus of voices greeted him. A gaggle of kobold girls in bunny outfits surrounded the entrance. Unlike standard bunny outfits, however, they didn’t come with fake ears or tails—the girls’ own doglike ears and swishy canine tails poked over their headbands and out of their playsuits. *I guess that makes them dog girls, then?* Kimihito’s head was spinning already.

“Kimihito! Glad you could make it!” Polt jumped out from the crowd. She was also in the bunny-dog-girl costume. Her fur stuck proudly through her fishnet tights, and Kimihito couldn’t help wondering what the texture would feel like if he stroked it.

“This place is great,” he said.

“Heh heh heh. Before you is the pinnacle of Kobold Industries technology. I’ve assembled the most beautiful girls from the company to assist here tonight. They’re our receptionists, so this is kind of outside their expertise, but they’re taking it in stride.” She nodded as she spoke, as if trying to reassure herself—she still had her reservations about the casino project. “How about the decor, though, Kimihito? Any suggestions?”

“Hmm.” He checked around. This was his first time in a casino, so he wasn’t sure whether the bright neon or the loud jukeboxes were part and parcel with it. There were no other customers yet, but the kobold girls bustled about, preparing the venue for them. There were slot machines, roulette, and card tables—all the games you’d expect—and a few of the kobolds were playing them with serious expressions. They must have been administrators testing them before opening. “It’s definitely got a casino feel,” he said.

“Yes!! We went to a bunch overseas for reference. Start playing whenever you like. Our employees are trained as dealers, too,” she said.

“That’s amazing, it’s just...” Where would he even start?

“Oh! Duh, of course! We haven’t given you your welcome drink.”

“D-drink...?” A free drink just to welcome him in was suspiciously generous.

“Hey! You! Bring him a drink, please!” Polt said to a girl passing by.

As the girl stopped, Kimihito was surprised to see she didn’t have any doggy ears or a doggy tail. Instead, she had massive wings and scales. “Yes, ma’am! It’ll be just a mo—ah, you!!” she shouted and pointed at Kimihito.

“D-Draco?!” He knew this woman! She was an androgynous type who often played a handsome man in public, though that wasn’t possible in the bunny girl outfit, which put her modest figure on display. Her outfit featured an open back, which allowed her wings—often restricted beneath her clothes—to spread out. Draco was the dragonet who’d once attempted to pick up Miia. “What’re you doing here? Is this another punishment for leaving without permission?”

“No!” She flared her wings, and the force broke against Kimihito like a strong gust of wind. She waved her arms to match. “I heard you’d be coming so I asked for permission to meet you, human! I even wore this ridiculous outfit!”

“Me?”

“I assumed that, if you were here, Miia would be, too! Ahh, my beautiful Miia—imagine a night doing whatever we desire in the hedonistic halls of this casino!” Draco was, as usual, lost in a fantasy right out of a romance movie.

“Um. Miia’s not coming.”

“Huh?”

“This was a solo invitation,” he explained.

“Grrrrrggghh!!” Draco snarled and tore at her hair.

Despite proclaiming her species, the dragonet, as the greatest of all liminals, she spent most of her time sneaking out to pick up other scaly liminal girls. It was safe to say she had some issues. Luckily, those escapist tendencies also made her easy to manipulate, as Polt had demonstrated with this particular gambit.

“Damn that dog woman! She tricked me! If I hadn’t thought Miia was coming I *never* would’ve agreed to work at this stupid casino!”

“But I *didn’t* say Miia was coming,” Polt said, “I just said Kimihito was. You’re the one who misinterpreted.” There was a smug little sparkle in her eyes. If Draco wanted to jump to conclusions, was it so wrong for Polt to take advantage? She didn’t *lie*...

Backed into a logical corner, Draco ground her teeth in impotent rage. “Ugh... you...okay! So I screwed up.”

“As long as you understand that, we’re all good,” Polt said with a smirk.

“I don’t want to do anything...but I guess I gave my word. Ugh, I’ll keep working.” She brushed a hand through her hair. When she wasn’t throwing fits and causing scenes, Draco was an attractive girl with slit pupils and a strong physique. With her sense of daring and her draconic features, she could easily set someone’s heart aflutter. Add to that her showy little bunny outfit...

Kimihito let his eyes drift.

Remembering the original order, Draco slipped out back but soon returned with a drink for him. “Here. It’s not a casino without a bit of boozing.”

“Oh. Uh. Sure.”

“Don’t worry, human, it’s just a weak cocktail. Welcome to Kobold Casino.” She handed over the drink and gave a proper bow.

Kimihito couldn't help thinking her vibe matched the casino perfectly. If she could avoid making moves on the customers, she'd do great here. He sipped the cocktail and was pleased to discover it was weak, as promised.

"Well, Kimihito, don't you think it's time to try a game?" Polt led him to the nearest table and passed him a pile of chips. They were various colors and had the Kobold Casino logo painted on them. A larger pile awaited in the center of the table. "For now, you've got the equivalent of about a million yen. Use it at your leisure."

"A million?!"

"Of course! For the moment it doesn't mean anything. When we're open, there'll be a change counter to cash it back into money, but for today, they're just bits of plastic."

Still, he felt a cold sweat seeping from his skin. Just bits of plastic, not real money, not *his* money—but it felt too close to a working casino as he stared at the pile before him.

"Well, what'll you play?" Polt asked.

"The slot machines are a bore," said Draco, "I'd suggest cards instead. Not that I get to deal anymore."

"Draco lost too much."

"Don't tell him that!"

He could easily imagine her getting overconfident and betting it all on bad odds. "I guess I could try a card game," he said.

"Gotcha! How about poker? I've got a first-class dealer you can play against!" Polt smiled brightly and took him to the table.

Poker... Can I remember the rules? Kimihito pondered. He remembered some of the rules, but he didn't have any real-world experience, which he figured he'd need to win in a casino. He was hoping the dealer would give him a break until they reached the table to see...

"Let's begin," said the woman across from him. Her fingertips, already set on the cards, were covered in something like tree bark. She kept a calm expression

as she regarded him. “It’s been a while, human.”

“Kii?” he gasped.

“How are Papi and Suu?” she asked. This was someone he knew *very* well: the dryad, Kii.

“We’ll leave this to Kii.” Polt took Draco and left for the floor.

Kii shuffled the cards in her branch-like fingers without a word.

“Um. So. What brings you here?” Kimihito asked her.

She didn’t normally wear clothes, as dryads needed plenty of exposed skin to perform photosynthesis, but today she was dressed in the standard bunny suit. Her appearance varied depending on her nutrient level—from small and flat to tall and curvy—and she’d filled up so she could fill out the uniform. Like the kobolds, she’d given the ears a pass; her head was covered in vines and leaves instead of hair, so putting them on must’ve been too difficult. “Polt requested it. She was shorthanded,” she said.

“I see.”

“Honestly, I wouldn’t have come, but I owed Polt—she cleans the mountain sometimes. I didn’t want to seem ungrateful.”

Kimihito inspected her lower half. Normally, she had literal roots set in that mountain, and she disliked visiting the city. To get here she’d formed two bipedal legs like a human’s, albeit covered in bark. She wasn’t wearing the fishnet tights the other girls had on, but they probably would’ve torn if she tried to get them over that rough skin. “You’re usually *annoyed* by people visiting, even if it’s to clean.”

“I don’t like it when it’s unannounced, but Polt is something of a regular now. Despite her pushiness, she’s a kind person. I felt I had to repay that kindness.”

“It’s nice to hear you say that,” he said with a smile.

“Shut up. Stupid human.” Kii turned her face from him. He was a credit to his species, but that didn’t make humans “good,” per se. Being in an urban environment was already wilting her leaves, browning the edges. “Shall we

play?”

“Ah. Sure.”

She dealt the cards skillfully, cutting the deck and passing Kimihito his lot with a practiced hand.

“You’re an expert at this,” he said, a touch anxious.

“Of course.” When they’d first met, she hadn’t even been able to read, but it seemed she was a fast learner when she had to be. With those smooth movements, gracefully separating one card from the next, any human professional would struggle to keep up.

“I wouldn’t have thought you’d be interested in this sort of thing.”

“Correct. I’m not interested—in this or any other human game.”

“But you’ve dedicated yourself to learning.”

“These days, I’m trying to keep an open mind. How much will you bet?”

He looked at his hand. It wasn’t bad. “How about this green chip?” He lifted it to indicate.

“That chip is worth 30,000 yen,” she said.

“Huh?” He felt light-headed as the number left her lips.

She chuckled at his distress. It was unusual to hear her laugh, too. “Well, well. Will you fold?”

“N-no.” He steadied himself. “I’ll make the bet.”

“Then it’s time for our showdown,” she said and flipped her cards casually.

“Full house.” Kimihito only had three-of-a-kind, so he lost.

With a strange T-shaped tool, Kii slid his chips to her side of the table.

“You’re good at this, Kii!” he said. Her stoic personality gave her a naturally flawless poker face, and as she had said, she was too disinterested in the game to react much as she played. This, as much as the mountain, was her element.

“Is this part of you keeping an open mind?”

“Oh. Hm. Yes,” she said, “I dislike humans, but even on the mountain, they

appear one after another to bother me. They drop their garbage and make a commotion. If I confront them directly, it never ends well.”

“It sounds infuriating,” he said.

Kii had been imported to Japan illegally. Despite the fact that she’d been trafficked and was an obvious victim, Japanese law considered her an illegal immigrant. That was why she’d lived a secret life on the mountain, hiding away from human society. Interacting with humanity only ever made her situation worse, so why would she choose to be around them?

Not that she could always help it. When she’d overindulged in nutrients, she’d grown into a giant and rampaged through her region. They’d only been able to stop her when Suu grew to an equally large size.

“As long as you don’t bother us, we shouldn’t bother you.”

“That was only because of those strange nutrients! Besides, I don’t have to touch your species, you’re perfectly capable of destroying yourselves.”

“Destroying ourselves?”

“Yes,” she said, fanning the cards in front of her and smiling dangerously, “through gambling.”

“Huh? Wait, you didn’t become a dealer just to—”

“I did. Those who come here destroy themselves through their own avarice. It’s the most human place I’ve ever seen. When we open, many humans will come here to lose their fortunes. And I will be across the table, watching.”

“Err, well...” What could he possibly say in response? Kii’s hatred for humans had somehow *intensified*. As long as she wasn’t actively harming them, though... Polt had asked her to come here, too... “Don’t go overboard?” he ventured.

“Of course. I will continue to do my duties as a dealer. If the customers somehow manage to win, they will leave unharmed. I just don’t care. You humans...” She flipped a chip between her fingers, butterflyflying it around the knuckles of her right hand. “You care quite a lot about this sort of thing. You want it badly, don’t you?”

As the chip rotated, Kimihito caught the number 30,000 engraved on its face. It was the chip he'd just lost. Even though it wasn't real money, wasn't his, and he was just here as a favor—it felt like a waste to have lost it. “Because it's fun to play with money,” he said, though he felt more bitter than anything.

“That's why I'm helping Polt. You're incorrigible. As long as you're ruining yourselves here, I'll be here, too.” She flicked more cards onto the table in front of him. “Another game?”

“I'm in,” Kimihito said.

“Yes,” Kii replied, “let's start over.”

He'd submitted to the allure of the casino. Kii smiled faintly and drew her hand.

Kimihito played ten games and lost them all.

“Ugh. I can't believe it.” He slumped in front of the table. Somehow Kii just kept winning.

“There were plenty of opportunities to get ahead,” she said. “Is it a strategy to ignore your enemy's weak spots? Some form of honor?”

“Hey, not betting is a strategy. Besides, you don't have any tells.”

“Perhaps you're just not observant enough,” she said as she shuffled again.

“Well, Kimihito.” Polt approached their table. “How's poker go—” She stopped short as she saw both chip piles. “Kimihito! You lost half your chips?!”

“The third match was especially bad,” Kii said. “He had a good hand and he raised quite a bit, but it made no difference. One small loss for Kimihito, one giant loss for mankind.”

He'd started out cautious with his bets, but as Kii defeated him over and over, his desire to win made him reckless.

“Kii, please hold back a bit. A dealer's job isn't just to win, they're meant to entertain the customers,” Polt said.

“But I thought the house always won? If we're not careful, we'll be in the red,

and you won't see any profit."

"We've gotta find the balance! Too harsh and no one will come back. That'll cost us, too. Keep it proportionate."

"I don't know if I can do that," Kii said, looking askance.

Polt held her head for a moment and then turned to Kimihito. "What's your perspective?"

"Kii's kinda scary, so maybe she should take it easier," he admitted.

"Always room for improvement!" Polt pulled a notebook from her vest pocket and took his comment down. "Be fairer with the win-loss ratio. Got it."

"Is that okay?"

"Course! We're not here to rob people. We want to take your money in exchange for thrills and dreams!"

"Those are some high ideals!"

Polt had clearly been adapting the casino project to work for her and her people. "I oughtta shift the exchange rates for chips, too. If you'd put real money on those you would've just lost 500,000 yen, Kimihito."

"Ugh." In the back of his mind, he'd understood that, but hearing it aloud was different. He swore he'd never come here when it opened for real. Forget about Miia and Centorea, he'd be risking bankruptcy himself.

"Would you like to try again? Maybe your luck will change," Kii asked, passing the cards between her hands.

"No, I'm good," Kimihito replied and shook his head emphatically. Just the *thought* of going bankrupt had rattled him. Besides, he wouldn't be much of a tester if he didn't try a mix of games. He had to save some chips for the rest of the floor. Then again, he could probably ask for more if he needed to...but the essence of gambling was having fun with limited funds. If he ignored that, the trial meant nothing. "Are you sure you don't need a break, Kii? Your leaves are kind of dry." He tried to change the subject.

"I-I'm fine."

“You’re wilting.”

“None of your business!” she growled at him, pulling away.

Polt whined like a dog in disappointment. “I’m sorry. We installed the latest filtration systems in the building, but there are too many bars in the area, so the smell of cigarette smoke keeps making its way in.”

“Are you all right, Polt?” Kimihito asked.

“No...I’ve got an amazing sense of smell, so it’s inescapable. It’s like it’s burning out my nose so I can’t smell anything else. But I’ll add it to the list of improvements.” She scribbled more in her notebook.

Kimihito squinted. Overall, the air was about what you’d expect from a casino, but it shouldn’t have been enough to damage Kii like that. Maybe it really was the city getting to her—but there was an *unusually* strong smell of cigarettes in this particular area. “Hmm.”

“What’s up?”

Curious, he left the table and made his way to the slot machines. A set of curtains ran behind them and split their section of the hall. Following his nose, he found more machines secreted away.

Polt gave chase. “S-sorry, Kimihito, this area isn’t done yet—” As she followed him, she continued to scrawl in her notebook.

Kii, overcome by curiosity, went with them.

Coming to a stop at a disassembled slot machine, Kimihito pointed to its back. “Look! Smoke.” A thin column rose from behind the machine. Several other machines formed a circle around it like a Roman Colosseum, hiding the source from view. Someone was hiding there. “It didn’t make sense for a kobold to smoke, since the smell was so irritating to them, but someone had definitely lit up inside.”

Nudging aside one of the machines to give them access, Polt led them into the culprit’s hiding spot. Inside was... “Lilith!”

“Agh!” Lilith sprang from her crouch, cigarette in hand. She was also wearing the bunny girl costume. “What the hell? I’m trying to enjoy my break!”

“I refuse to let you smoke on the premises!”

“Damn it!” she swore. “How’d you find me, anyway? Isn’t there enough stinking up the place to hide a single cigarette?” Scratching her head, she looked past Polt to Kimihito and Kii. “Ah! Human! Of course you’re behind this. Can’t believe they pulled you into this scheme, too.”

“I can’t believe *you’re* here, Lilith! Are you working?” he asked.

“Eh, something like that,” she said with a smirk. “Polt dragged me in as punishment for going out without permission. First I thought ‘ugh, what a pain,’ but then I realized casinos’re full of rich idiots who don’t watch their wallets—” Before she could confess the details of her plan, she noticed how Kimihito and Polt were looking at her. “Except I’m just a good widdle girl, sweet Lilith, who’s here to work hard and accept the pay she’s given! How could I say no to nice Miss Polt’s offer?”

“I don’t think anyone’s buying it,” said Kimihito. Everyone had spent too long with Lilith to believe she was anything but a devil. She drank, she smoked, and she’d con anyone out of their money first chance she got.

Lilith clicked her tongue and extinguished her cigarette in a handheld ashtray. Kii backed away from the smoke with a grimace of distaste on her face.

“All right, all right, back to work...” Lilith grumbled.

“Yes,” insisted Polt.

With another click of her tongue, Lilith turned to leave. Her devilish wings spread from the open back of her outfit and flapped loudly at the group. The bunny girl costumes were meant for women with generous figures, like Polt and Kii, so on Lilith’s childish form, the front gaped open and allowed Kimihito to see right through to her— “Whoa! Where’re you looking, Mister? Scaryyy!”

“I-I wasn’t—”

“Gross, you pedophile! I’m gonna have to tell Miss Rachnera! ☆” Lilith cackled. She clearly knew that the gaping front of her bustier would show her small breasts from that angle and chose it on purpose. He had to be careful around demons like her.

“Lilith! No making fun of the customers!” Polt barked.

“Whaaat? But he’s the creep!” She couldn’t stop herself from laughing.

“And *you* were the one smoking earlier when you were supposed to be on duty! I’ll have to write you up.” Polt snatched the pack of cigarettes from Lilith’s hand and crushed them in her grip without much effort, forearm flexing.

“H-huh?! Hey dog-woman, maybe you haven’t heard, but smoking’s an important part of the casino lifestyle!”

“Then we’re gonna revolutionize the industry! This is gonna be a healthy place. Isn’t that right, Kimihito?” Her notebook was back out, and she was writing furiously.

“I-is it?” he asked.

“What a shame it would be,” Kii deadpanned, “if this place were destroyed by its own management.”

Kimihito was baffled. Polt was already a mismatch for the whole casino concept but trying to change it to fit her healthy image seemed even more absurd. Wasn’t gambling inherently dangerous?

“Moving along! Which game are you gonna try next, Kimihito?” She asked.

Even if this place was doomed, the least he could do was try to save it with his honest feedback. “How about roulette?”

“Nya ha ha! Roulette? You’ll be needing an opponent! Allow me, Mister~! ☆” Lilith said, her tail whipping around in a frenzy.

Kii stepped forward like she intended to participate, too.

Lilith smirked. “I’m gonna chip away at him until there’s nothing left.”

“I’m right here, Lilith,” Kimihito said.

“Tee hee! ☆” She stuck her tongue out in denial like an innocent little girl.

“Come on, red seven!” Kimihito called and set his chips on the table.

“Oho? Sure you wanna make a straight-up bet like that?” Lilith asked.

“I wouldn’t recommend it,” Kii said.

“Huh?” Kimihito didn’t really know the rules of roulette, but it seemed like his instinct was already guiding him wrong.

Before he could take it back, Lilith rang the bell. “No more bets! ☆ Here goes the wheel!” She spun the roulette wheel and rolled the white ball in the opposite direction. It gradually decelerated until it settled in one of the pockets with a *clunk*. “That’s rouge eighteen! Your chips’re mine, Mister! ☆”

“Ugh.” They’d just started and he’d immediately had a huge loss.

“I bet on red. I win,” said Kii, collecting her chips.

It was time Kimihito accepted that he was totally, utterly, completely unsuited for gambling. He had the worst luck. “So you *don’t* just...bet which spot it’s going to land on,” he said.

“There’s lots of ways to bet. Rouge or noir? Evens or odds? Maybe three specific numbers? You’ve gotta get with the rhythm of the table, though,” Lilith said. “Play again, Mister?”

He could tell this would be a miserably steep learning curve. “N-no, I think I’ll leave it there.”

“Aw, and here I was, about to hypnotize you and make you bet all your money. ☆” Lilith said with a chuckle.

As a demon, Lilith had hypnosis in her bag of liminal tricks. She had, in fact, hypnotized Kimihito in the past. He’d been told by Doppel afterwards that his actions hadn’t been quite right. It turned out Lilith had commanded him to “be true to himself,” and he’d become more serious as a result. If she hypnotized him to steal his money, though, that would be more of a problem. He’d probably leave the casino immediately in protest.

“Hey, no hypnotizing the customers,” Kii chided.

“C’mon! It was just a joke. Kimihito’s too much of a pushover to be worth hypnotizing anyway.”

“True.”

Gee, thanks. It was depressing that they thought he was so weak. Though he

had lost all his chips to them, so at least for today, he couldn't prove otherwise.

"I had fun here! ☆" Lilith said, "Did you have fun, Mister?"

"I learned a valuable lesson—I'm bad at gambling," Kimihito said.

"And knowing is half the battle! Maybe it's best if you stay away. Besides, if I run into you here, there's not much I can do to you." She grinned and showed her sharp, demonic teeth.

Kii sighed. "I suppose you're done here?"

"Yeah, but, uh—where's Polt gone?" Kimihito asked.

"I believe she went to deal with a shipment that just came in—a new outfit for Draco."

Kimihito tilted his head. He'd tried a few games and used most of his chips; it felt like the right moment to leave. If he stayed much longer, Miia and the others would start to worry.

A desperate scream reverberated throughout the casino. "That's ridiculous! Who would make something like this?"

"Draco, this is a brand-new style—it's the on-trend, up-to-the-minute type of bunny girl costume!"

"I'm not sure it even qualifies as an outfit!" Draco shouted. "Gimme a freakin' break!"

Kimihito turned toward the commotion, curious what Draco was shouting about.

"Seriously! Clothes are supposed to have *fabric*!"

"According to our research, casinos around the globe are moving toward this kind of minimal look!" Polt said.

"I don't know who sold you this garbage, but they're ripping you off!" Draco folded her arms over herself.

Unlike the swimsuit-style bunny girl costumes everyone else wore, this outfit was barely pasties and panties—it consisted of a heart on each breast and a larger one over the crotch. As if to make up for how much of the torso it

exposed, the arms and legs were fully covered in opera-style gloves and opaque tights.

This was the advanced version of the bunny girl costume: the reverse bunny girl costume. And Draco was, begrudgingly, wearing it.

“Draco, where’d you get—” Kimihito started.

“Shut up! Don’t look at me! Polt asked me to try the new outfit—turns out, it’s not an outfit at all!”

Yet you put it on and walked out in it...

“Didn’t you think about that before trying it on?” Lilith saved him from speaking his mind.

“I put the arms and the legs on, and by the time I realized, it was too late!”

“Just go change, Draco,” Polt said.

The outfit was so sexy it made Kimihito light-headed. And Draco was too busy complaining to go back to the break room and change.

Polt was clearly having some buyer’s remorse now that she was being confronted about the purchase. “Ehh...”

Kimihito felt a drip from his nose.

“Hey. Human.” Kii pointed at a spot of blood on the ground. As she did, another fell beside it, dripping like a broken tap. “You’re bleeding.”

“Wh—oh no,” Kimihito said, leaning forward to look.

“Ooh! Who’s a naughty boy?” Lilith teased.

He was nervous about getting blood on his clothes, but he didn’t know what to do.

“Uh oh! Where’s the first aid kit?” Polt asked.

“Ugh, don’t get excited! As if I’d ever want a man to feel like that about me!” Draco snapped.

“Then why...haven’t...you taken...the outfit *off?!’*” Even Polt was at the end of her rope. The floor was loud and busy as they all got upset at each other.

Unable to move, Kimihito wavered in place, forcing Polt to take the initiative. She hoisted him into her arms with surprising strength and, ignoring the other girls, carried him away.

Kimihito understood he'd been laid on a couch in a back room somewhere, but with how dizzy he felt, he wasn't sure what else had happened. Someone had put something cold on his forehead. An ice pack, maybe. He couldn't open his eyes.

"Can you believe it? All that preaching, and the second he sees a reverse bunny girl costume, his nose is gushing like a hydrant! Adults are the worst!" Lilith said.

"Show some respect, Lilith. You're an adult, too," Kii scolded. Someone lifted Kimihito's head and placed it on something soft. He assumed it was a pillow—but the longer he lay there, the more he realized the texture was wrong. While his head was on a nice, soft surface, his neck brushed against something rough...like the bark of a tree. "How do you feel, human?" a voice rumbled through his head.

"Kii?" he asked. It took effort to open his eyes, and they didn't get far. Most of his field of vision was covered in greenery. "A lap pillow..." he murmured.

"*Don't*. Pretend it's gentle grass, surrounded by roots. You're lying at the base of a tree. It's so comfortable, you're not sure when you'll get up," she said.

It surprised him that she'd volunteered for this—someone so grumpy, who hated humans so much. Her bunny girl outfit was gone, and she was naked, as she preferred to be, with her leaf-like organs hiding her important parts.

"What's with the change of heart?" he asked.

"I still hate humans," she said, "but you're Papi's boss. If you got hurt, she would worry. Besides, I saw you do this for Tio, once. Stay there as long as you like." Her voice was as flat as ever, but her actions showed at least some concern for him.

"Mister! Hey! Listen!" Lilith said.

“Uh?”

“Hee hee hee. You’re bleeding again!” She stuck a tissue against his nose.

“Agh...ugh...hurts...”

“That’s the punishment for being a bad, bad man,” Lilith said. She was unreasonably happy to see him in such a pathetic state, and her tail whirled around her. She’d changed her clothes, too.

“This is so embarrassing,” Kimihito groaned.

“Tch, it’s just what we’d expect from a creepy man like you. Just relax, unwind, and let me seduce you. While you’re distracted, I’ll take your money and run.”

“I’m not interested in a kid,” he said.

“I’m not a kid!” she said immaturely.

“Heyyy, human!” Draco slammed into the break room, back in casual wear. Kimihito breathed a sigh of relief that he wouldn’t have to see the reverse bunny girl suit again. “So, you finally stopped bleeding!”

“For the moment.”

“How could anyone like men when they behave like this? They don’t have brains, just a mass of perverted thoughts. Girls are far superior. *Especially* the scaly kind. Like Miia, and Liz, and—” she ran through a whole list of girls who weren’t present.

“If you hadn’t been wearing that—”

“Shut up, tiny!”

“As if I’d be intimidated by an exhibitionist who wore a reverse bunny girl costume in public.”

“I’m not an exhibitionist!!”

It looked like they were heading for a fight. Kii ignored it; not her problem. Her expression stayed calm as she stroked Kimihito’s hair.

“A-anyway! It was all a big mistake, so let’s forget it and move on. That means you, human! If you try to talk to Miia about it—heck, if you so much as *think*

about it in her presence—you'll burn," Draco threatened, pointing her finger at him.

"Sure, I won't tell her." He was still too dizzy to care.

Draco was caught off guard. Her eyes widened. "Um. Mm. Yeah. A-all right. Good. We're all just gonna...forget," she said.

"If I did remember, I'd just start bleeding, so..." He gave a weak gesture of agreement from Kii's lap.

"Kimihiro!" Polt leapt into the room. "How're you feeling?" Was that everyone? Seemed like the whole menagerie was here.

"Pretty much better," he said.

"Great! Guess we should've done the reverse bunny trial run in private before its public debut. I'm embarrassed about the whole situation, so I wanted to apologize." Her ears drooped as she spoke.

"*You're* embarrassed?" Draco called.

Polt ignored her to scribble more in her improvement notebook. "If you're up to it, Kimihiro, I wanted to go over your testing experience. I need to make sure I've got the notes right."

"Uh." He could hardly remember what he'd said prior to fainting. Did it even matter? He lost badly to Kii and Lilith, then got knocked out by the sight of Draco in a sexy outfit. If that was a "normal" evening at the casino, no amount of feedback could help. "Okay?" he said warily.

"Firstly, you said Kii was too unforgiving as a dealer, and she needed to hold back," Polt said.

"I refuse," Kii said, turning her face to the side.

"Also, the rates on our chips are too high, so we should offer smaller denominations. Otherwise the customers will go bankrupt!"

"But my whole plan was to bring humans to financial ruin..."

Kimihiro was relieved that Kii's evil scheme had been nipped in the bud.

"Also, the alcohol is too strong, so we're becoming a dry casino!" Polt said.

“Huh?” Lilith said.

“Likewise, neither the staff nor the customers will be allowed to smoke on-site!”

“Ugh!”

“Outfits that’re too revealing are a *major* health and safety hazard! No more bunny girls, reverse or otherwise.”

“What?!” That was it! Lilith couldn’t take it anymore. “This isn’t some arcade! Why’s it gotta be so family friendly?”

“Oooh, an arcade! That’s a great idea! We’re pivoting to arcades! That’ll be much fairer to the customers,” Polt said with an earnest smile.

“Do you even understand the *point* of a casino?” Draco asked, but once again she was ignored. It made sense that a health-conscious person like Polt would talk herself out of everything that made a casino a casino.

“Um? Polt-san? Don’t people come here because they want to win the jackpot?” Kimihito asked.

“Yeah, but it’s a ruff deal, draining their wallets for that chance. If we stay small scale we can keep it fair. Our founding principle will be ‘bet a little, make a little!’” She punched her fist overhead.

“Hmm,” Kimihito grumbled, not sure those books would balance. Was he responsible for this change in direction? If Polt’s project ran at a loss after this, he’d feel bad.

“Don’t worry,” said Kii, seeming to have read his mind. “It might not be a traditional casino, but it’ll definitely fit with Polt’s brand. I’m surprised she got this far without making these sorts of changes.”

“Th-thanks, I think?”

“If I lose the fringe benefits, I can always return to the mountain,” she said, placid. As ever, it was hard to tell what she was talking about. What *had* become clearer was her intent. She was trying to cheer him up.

“She’s right,” said Lilith, “Polt was always too straightlaced for this gig.”

“She puts so much energy into such pointless projects...but it’s one of her charm points. Anyway, it’s a bad idea to enter an industry you’re not familiar with,” Draco said, looking at Polt.

Polt couldn’t seem to hear them.

The trio gazed fondly at her, grateful for the kobold’s continued belief in them—despite how much trouble they could be.

“All right, I’ll make this work!” Polt looked up from her notebook with an eager grin.

“You can do it!” The trio cheered her on. Though none of them sounded sincere, that was just their flat affect. They could be good people in their own ways, and Kimihito had become fond of them for it.

The next day, Kimihito found himself back at the café.

“It didn’t work,” Polt said and threw herself onto the table with a sob, “I pitched our wholesome, health-conscious casino concept, but the client said it wouldn’t make any money, and they withdrew the offer.”

“Uh, um, hm. Sorry to hear that,” Kimihito said.

“No, I’m trying to think positive.” She wiped at her tears. “If profit’s the main priority, we’ll forget our dues to society, and Kobold Industries just won’t be the same. This might be a big financial loss, but it’ll let us keep our identity. There’ll be other opportunities in the future! And we’ll make sure they’re in health and wellness.”

“That sounds like the best call for you, Polt-san.” It was a shame her idea hadn’t worked, but she hadn’t faltered in pursuit of her true goals, and that was what mattered. He raised his coffee to his lips and drank to the satisfaction of a job well done.

“However! I wanted to apologize for the inconvenience of making you a tester on a failed project.”

“There’s no need! It was my advice that changed your plans, for better or worse.”

“For *better!*” she stressed. “I needed you there to remind me of the core of my business philosophy.”

“You think so? Thanks, Polt.”

“Though it does put us at a deficit this month...I’m not sure I can pay you.”

“Pay? I don’t need any pay,” he insisted, trying to remember if he’d been promised any to start with.

She shook her head. “I hired you, and you did your job. I have to make sure you’re compensated. This is what I found instead.” She slid an envelope across the table to him.

It couldn’t be money, since she’d just said there wouldn’t be any pay—what could it be?

“This is a ticket for preferential treatment from Kobold Industries,” she said.

“‘Preferential treatment’?”

“At our gyms, training facilities, and relaxation facilities—as well as our yet-to-open resort hotels and the like! You’ll be able to use any of them for free whenever you please. There are passes for your homestay girls, too, so please come by any time!”

“This is worth *a lot* of money, though, isn’t it?” Kimihito was in shock. If he converted this to its actual value, it was worth—no, it couldn’t be done. It was incalculable.

Polt wore a warm, self-satisfied smile. “You were knocked out cold in the line of duty! You deserve every yen.”

“Oh. *Huh*. Thank you.” He took the envelope. When he lifted it, the eight tickets felt much heavier than the cardboard they were printed on.

“Don’t be a stranger! All right, I’ve got a lot scheduled today, so I’ve gotta dash,” Polt said, standing.

“What’s got you so busy?” he asked.

She rolled a large suitcase from under her side of the table. “Actually, I’m headed to a negotiation! In Hawaii! Remember that resort I mentioned?”

Now that Kimihito looked, he realized there was a familiar man in the doorway of the café, tall and bearded. “Don’t forget to relax sometimes,” he said.

“Psh! It might be for business, but it’ll be fun, too. Thanks so much for all your help, Kimihito!” She gave him a sharp salute, and then, without a single backward look, left the café with her interpreter.

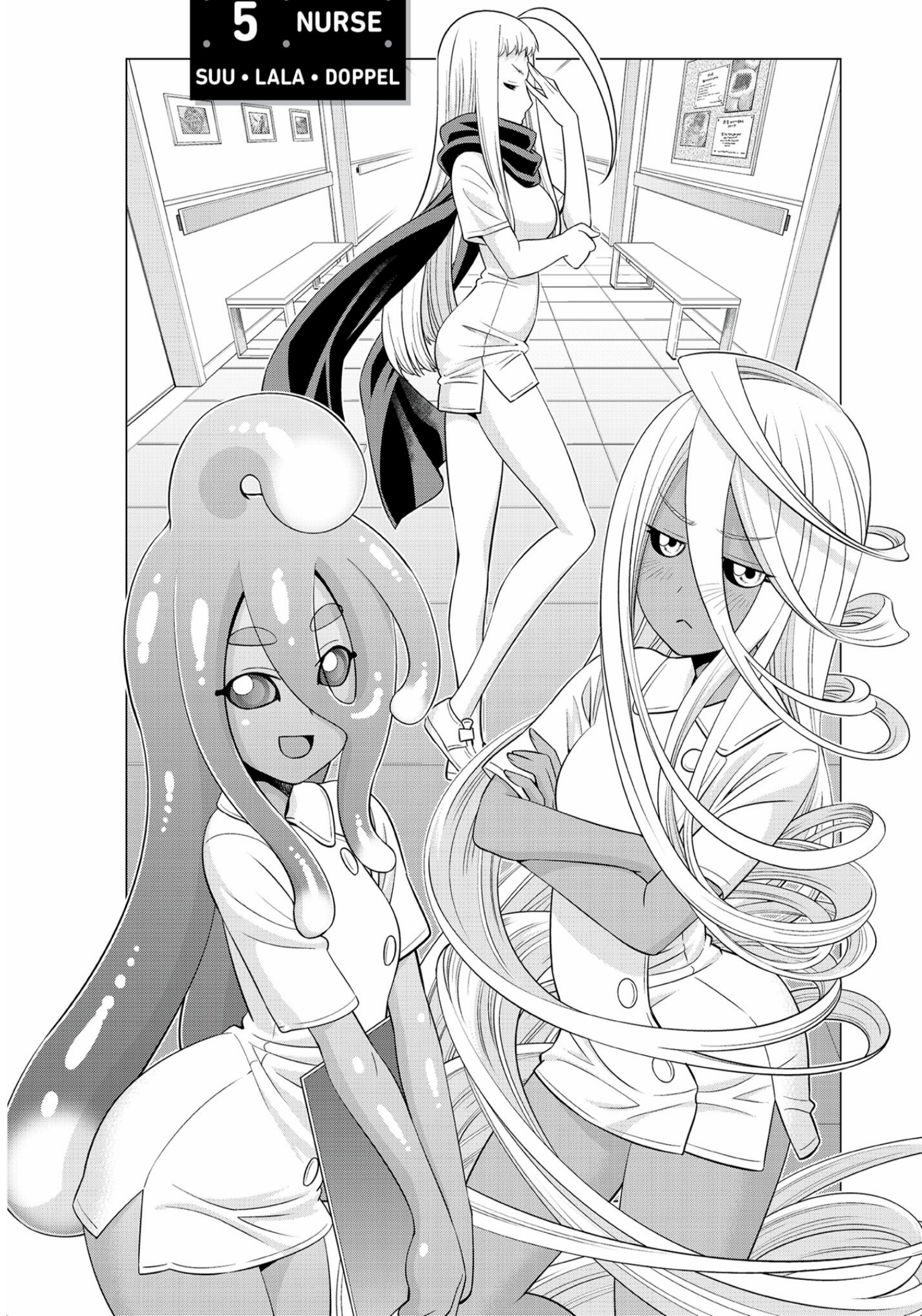
Despite her casual attitude, Polt was such a hardworking woman. She made him feel guilty that his own work ethic—mostly around exercise—wasn’t as good as it could’ve been. On that note! He took his tickets and stood from the table, stretching. There was still one last pilot test to go. It might’ve been an exhausting evening, but Polt’s optimism left him feeling energized.

I’ll do my best too, he thought.

Someday he’d figure out how she did it—how to come out of a failure without losing heart.

5 NURSE

SUU • LALA • DOPPEL



SUU THE SLIME slid the rest of the way into her nurse's uniform and smiled. "Suu's a nurse! A nursuu!" Her hair—slime—tentacles—whatever it was on top of her head flicked up and down like bunny ears as she tried to get Kimihito's attention.

It was strange to see her in clothes. Once he was looking, it was hard to stop. He forced himself to blink. "What's that, Suu?"

"From the hospital! What do you think, Master?" she asked.

"I think it looks nice on you, Suu," he said.

"It looks nice! It looks nice!" Suu chanted, whirling around the room to show it off.

"Oh, she got a water-resistant version? That's nice." Doppel seemed to materialize from nowhere.

"Doppel," Kimihito greeted her.

She wrapped her arm around his and grinned. She was in her usual form, a slight woman with dark skin, and she wore a matching nurse's uniform.

"You're wearing clothes, too?"

"Ugh." Her mood turned. Doppel famously disliked clothes and was almost always naked. Her long, flowing hair did a good enough job covering her crotch and nipples—if someone tried to sneak a peek from an odd angle, it would even shift to cover her. It took a special occasion for her to put anything on. "I didn't want to, but everyone was saying 'wear it, wear it.'"

The other nurses around them giggled.

"Come on, Doppel-chan."

"It's important to wear a uniform when you're representing the hospital!"

Kimihito knew all the nurses here. Today, the last day of the work experience program, they were at one of Japan's rare liminal-specialist hospitals. He'd visited a lot with his homestay girls and had started to think of the nurses as acquaintances.

“Knock it off! I didn’t want to do this stupid program in the first place! I contribute plenty to society by catching bad guys,” Doppel said.

“But Suu-chan can’t work at a regular shop, can she?”

“And someone needs to watch her on Smith-san’s behalf.”

The nurses chided her.

“Ugh.”

Kimihito couldn’t help but laugh. Suu hadn’t come to Japan via the proper channels for liminal immigration, and her behavior continued to be a mystery. That meant the government—Smith included—couldn’t officially recognize her but also couldn’t leave her alone. Most of the time it was convenient for her to slip into Kimihito’s household where someone experienced could watch her, but whenever the girls went out into the world, she caused a fresh bureaucratic headache.

In the case of the work program, they couldn’t give her a formal assignment, but they wanted as much data as possible and refused to leave her out. Looking at their options, they decided the hospital was the safest placement. The nurses had seen Suu before and knew her legal situation. They had plenty of affection for her too, and they were excited to dress her up and take care of her. The whole ward was thrilled to have her.

Suu was happy, too! She had her waterproof nurse’s uniform, and she skipped around humming in celebration.

“Hey, Buddy, whatcha staring at?” Doppel sidled over to Kimihito, her hair drifting around her shoulders. She was too messy to fit with the clean hospital aesthetic.

“It’s just strange seeing you both in clothes,” Kimihito said.

“Yeah, well, it’s embarrassing, so don’t,” she said.

“Isn’t that backwards? Being embarrassed by clothes but okay being naked?”

“It’s a doppelgänger thing. Don’t judge liminals based on human social mores. There are lots of different cultural standards out there.” As her name implied, Doppel was a doppelgänger, and she used her hair to change into different

forms. Suu could also change shape—but her texture would always be slime. There was nothing that could mimic true doppelgänger transformation.

“Maybe, but when in Rome...” Or Tokyo, as the case may be.

“Grrr.” Doppel couldn’t refute that.

“Besides, you dressed up that time we went out together, didn’t you?”

“That was one night only! Ugh, whatever. I’m keeping this on for the job today, so you’d better be grateful,” she said, posing for him and blushing all the while. She seemed like she was getting into it. Or she might’ve been getting into character as a nurse and feeling good about that. Whatever the reason, she was blushing hard.

“Suu can do it, too!” Suu said, mimicking Doppel’s pose. She brandished a syringe as a prop.

“Is that real?” Kimihito asked.

“Hee hee! ♪” she giggled without answering.

“But where’s...?” He looked around for the other homestay girl who was supposed to be at the hospital.

“Aye,” she said, stepping from the shadows, “I’m ill-suited tae a pure, white raiment such as this, being borne of the darkness of the abyss. Though me sins may seep through like so much spilled blood, I have donned it nonetheless.” Lala the dullahan was wearing a nurse’s uniform, too.

“There you are, Lala.”

Even with the uniform on, she kept her scarf wound around her neck, the black and white fabrics in sharp contrast. After all, if she removed it, her head would come tumbling off.

“How’s the shift been so far?” he asked.

“’Tis nary a hardship, for one such as meself, tae turn from ministration of the dead tae care of the living,” she said. Her obscure speech made it hard to understand, but there was a simple solution for that.

“Excuse me for a minute,” he said and took Lala’s head from her shoulders.

“Unhand me!” the head shrieked, pale blue skin turning red. The body’s reaction was particularly obvious—her legs clamped together and gave her a pigeon-toed walk as she struggled toward him. She was mortified. “Give it back!”

“Woops! Sorry.” He returned it to her. Lala could be so poetic that she became impossible to understand. When she was, separating her head from her body forced her to cut to the chase. In this case, she’d revealed just how embarrassed she was about having to wear the nurse’s uniform. “I feel bad, Lala. It’s a stressful place to do your first job.”

“Worry not. I already had a duty here,” she said.

“Huh?” What kind of errand would Lala be on at a liminal-focused hospital?

Lala looked around the area for a while as if she was searching for something. “Ah!” Whatever it was, she’d found it.

Following her gaze from the nurse’s station into a nearby room, he saw an ill-looking girl less than ten years old. The girl saw them too and rushed toward Lala. Wait, didn’t she look familiar?

“Reaper-san!” cheered the girl.

“Yuuhi. Ye *are* here,” Lala said.

“Yeah, and so are you, Reaper-san! Are you a nurse today?” She pointed at the uniform and smiled.

The girl’s name was Yuuhi Hajime, and until recently, she had been a human hospitalized with a deadly disease. When she was at death’s door, Lala intervened (without permission), taking a zombie’s tooth and making Yuuhi one of the living dead. Despite being a zombie, she looked much livelier than she used to. *Happier and healthier too*, Kimihito thought as he watched her and Lala.

“Tae atone for me many sins, I have sworn meself in service of the society of the crimson cross,” Lala said.

“I see. You’re doing work experience,” Yuuhi said.

“Though I risk bringing their holy garb tae disrepute, I have wrapped this wretched body in its soft embrace and seek absolution among them.”

“Wearing a nurse’s uniform and everything, huh?”

“Furthermore, I seek tae meet with yer ladyship and inquire upon ye health.”

“I’m doing fine! This is just a routine visit to have my preservation fluid changed.”

It was hard to tell if Yuuhi and Lala were on the same wavelength or not. Kimihito hoped they were—he’d realized that Lala requested to work for this hospital so she could check on Yuuhi. Yuuhi could no longer go to a human hospital and had to be treated here, but she seemed comfortable with the change and had even built a rapport with the nurses.

“How could anyone continue in such a sick, sad world?” Lala asked.

“I’m fine! In fact, I’m really glad you came to visit,” Yuuhi said.

“I see.”

“Anyway, I’ve got to go—come play again sometime, Reaper-san!” She smiled and waved as a nurse escorted her out.

“You could’ve just said you wanted to see Yuuhi-chan,” Kimihito said.

“Tch. I have nae interest in the petty concerns of the living,” Lala said casually. It could be hard to read her expressions, but in this case, it was clear she was thinking about Yuuhi. “At any rate, ye’ll fall tae our blades soon.”

“Huh? What?”

“Were you not informed?” Her eyes widened.

He was about to speak when something wet splashed over his arm. “Wh—Suu?”

“Master! Exam!” Suu said.

“What?”

“Hah, did nobody tell you, Buddy? Or maybe that jerk Smith kept it secret on purpose.” Doppel’s hair reached out and wound around him.

He still didn't know why he was being restrained, just that he was, the strange elastic pull of Doppel's hair and the wet grasp of Suu's tentacles taking hold of his arms.

"Be good and stay still! The doctors are here to look after you," Doppel said.

"Me?! Why?! These are doctors for liminals, not humans!"

"That may be true, but you've been manhandled by so many of us, you're lucky to be alive. The doctors are excited to meet the star case study from all those reports."

"There's nothing wrong with me!"

"You've been squeezed by lamias and landed on by harpies, and even passed out at Polt's casino—all with no lasting injuries. No broken bones or side effects. Can you be sure you're human? You're so special it only makes sense for liminal specialists to do this." Doppel was set on it.

"*That's* why? Because I'm *too* healthy?!"

"At least that's what I think—but why don't we get a second opinion?"

Her hair twined around his arms like a living thing, reeling him back in whenever he tried to escape. Suu clung to his side, and Lala held his legs—she was surprisingly strong, maybe from carrying a scythe everywhere.

"All right! Make way! We've got a patient!" Doppel shouted as they walked through the ward.

"Suu with a syringe! What will she do?"

"It's tae be an examination, then? Whatever fate the inquisition may choose, I will await at the gates of the underworld."

"I'm not dying!" Kimihito huffed. "Seriously! Wait!!" He struggled with his bonds to no avail.

"Sheesh, calm down! Most guys *would* die to be held by this many cute nurses," Doppel said.

"Sure, it's great, until you try to *examine* me," Kimihito retorted.

"Too late to argue, we're outta here!" She raised her fist in the air.

Suu and Lala cheered in response.

No matter how he resisted, he couldn't get them to stop. They dragged him to an unknown wing of the hospital.

"The results are in!" one of the human nurses said and then furrowed her brow at the page. "You're definitely...normal."

"I-Is that so?" Kimihito breathed a sigh of relief.

The nurse, however, was not pleased. It made him anxious, seeing her scowl at what seemed like a good result.

"Nah, he's still weird," Doppel said. "He gets squeezed by lamia, kicked by centaurs, drowned by mermaids, and there's never a scratch on him?"

"Aye, 'tis long past time his soul was collected. As a dullahan, I say he is most unusual," Lala agreed.

"If the exams say I'm healthy, then that's that," Kimihito said and folded his arms.

"But a healthy *what*? There's no way you're human, Buddy," Doppel said.

"He might not be strong, but he's certainly sturdy. Kurusu-san, are you getting proper rest? Do you give yourself time to recover after hard labor or taxing sports?" the nurse asked.

Kimihito shook his head. "I don't do much, so I've got nothing to rest from."

"Liar. How many pilot program events did you attend this week? Everyone else was one and done, but you've been to four of them. You've done the most work by far," Doppel said, easily disproving him.

He could say nothing in response.

"Plus Polt's gig makes five. You're overworked!"

"What was I supposed to do, turn her down?"

"Yes! You're too damn nice! Learn to say no!" She shook her head in disgust.

The nurse sighed. "I asked because, while you're otherwise healthy, you did

show signs of fatigue. You need to take care of yourself, all right?”

“O-okay...” At one point, he’d worked part-time to pay for everyone’s food by himself, and he still measured his exhaustion against that benchmark. The nurse wouldn’t know that, though. “Anyway, if I’m fine, maybe we should get back to the girls’ work experience? What should they do?”

“They don’t have to do anything,” the nurse said.

“Huh?”

“Suu-chan isn’t allowed to help. She doesn’t have any qualifications. We just thought it’d be cute to let her wear the uniform,” the nurse said.

“Oh. That makes sense.” Now that he thought about it, of course they couldn’t let untrained people handle their patients. Having experienced their “care,” he was very aware why.

“But to be honest, you *are* exhausted, Kurusu-san.”

“I—I’m not!”

“Maybe they can look after you as practice?” She spoke with complete seriousness.

The new nurses, the completely unqualified trio of Suu, Doppel, and Lala, all looked at Kimihito in unison.

“We have some relaxation facilities here, and they’re currently empty. Why don’t you all use those?”

“Suu will fix Master,” Suu said.

“Guess we’re back on the clock, Buddy. Let’s go take care of you,” Doppel said.

“Take care of me? Fix me? What’re you planning??” Kimihito asked.

Lala was hesitant, but Suu and Doppel were all in.

Ignoring his distress, the nurse excused herself from the room, “I’ve got other patients to tend to. Have a lovely time!”

“Don’t leave me like this—”

“You’re lucky, Kurusu-san. You’re perfectly healthy and surrounded by lovely young women looking out for your well-being. You’re going to have a wonderful afternoon,” she replied as she disappeared down the hall.

“Looking out *how*?”

The girls surrounded him.

“Suu gonna take good care.”

“That’s great, but what’re you gonna do, Suu?” he asked.

“That.” She pointed at a massage chair across the hallway.

It wasn’t a normal chair for human use. It was covered in weird, long appendages and a few short protrusions as well. It wasn’t clear what any of them were supposed to do.

Before he could get carried away imagining what it was for, he noticed a sign, “Liminal Massage Chair: Still in Testing Phase”. On the right side of the machine was a familiar logo that looked like a dog’s paw print. Now, who could have made such a thing...?

“Suu wanna try,” Suu said.

“Wooooo.” A noise came from Suu’s mouth, but he wasn’t sure if she was trying to talk or if it’d been shaken out of her by the vibrations.

“Ahhh...feels nice...” Kimihito said from atop her.

Her current round shape made it feel more like sitting on a giant flan than a liminal. The moment he sat down, she sank around him like memory foam so he’d be evenly supported. A passerby might have mistaken her for a clear, green sofa.

“You’re...too stiff...sir...let me...help...” said Suu.

“Where’d you learn *that* line?” Doppel asked. A lot about Suu was a mystery, including how she managed to speak while she was a massage chair.

“Whatever. How’re you feeling, Buddy? Our makeshift chair giving any results?”

“Ahhh...” Kimihito repeated, vibrating so intensely that he couldn’t speak

even if he wanted to—and he didn't want to.

Doppel chuckled. "Yeah, you're gonna be useless after this."

With his whole body sunken in the slime, he felt weightless. He had no idea how she did it, but Suu had formed a mass like a firm rubber ball that pummeled the knotted muscles all over his body. "Awesooome," he groaned.

"You're a strange, depraved creature, Suu. I can't underestimate you," Doppel said.

Suu was always a quick study. When she first arrived, she'd been unable to speak, but she'd learned bit by bit until she could attend study meetings with Mero and Rachnera. Just by inspecting the massage chair, she'd been able to change herself into a copy with similar features. Her mind—or the slime equivalent—was incredible.

"Is Suu awesome? Is Suu smart?" she asked.

"Yeah...yeah...you're awesome... I'm gonna fall asleep..." No sooner had Kimihito said it than he started to doze.

"Master, you can't sleep yet—"

"Man, that slime's got more tricks than I do," Doppel remarked.

"Are ye incapable of a feat such as this?" Lala asked.

Doppel silently bowed her head. "I can become any person I like, but changing into an object? Inanimate stuff is next level."

"I see."

"Think of it as Suu's special move," she said, watching the Suu Massage Chair rumble harder and smiling. "She's got him taken care of. We could go home, if we wanted."

"I remain tied to this place," Lala said.

"Was there something you wanted to do?"

"Hm?" Lala hid her mouth in her scarf. "Rumor has it, the other homestay girls outdid themselves. As a shinigami, my name would be forever blackened were I to skive off work. If our fate is to tend this poor soul, then so be it.

Here I will remain.”

“Ah ha? Oh *ho*? Is that it? Or do you just want to repay him for taking care of you?”

“Hmph!” Lala responded indignantly.

All the while, Kimihito drifted in his slime paradise, unable to hear them. Suu’s massage power was so overwhelming that he had even forgotten the concept of work. Nothing meant anything anymore. There was only the chair.

Suu, though, was busy analyzing their surroundings. There were several other patients at the relaxation facility. An oni used a massager on herself, and two other liminals—an eel-like mermaid and a centaur—were receiving spa treatments.

Then she saw an osteopath who was treating some sort of harpy. It was a logical treatment for a harpy to choose, since keeping their wings correctly aligned was so important. “Suu wants to try...*that*,” she said.

“Huh?” Kimihito said.

“*Suuthe* Master. Fix Master’s body.”

Kimihito had no time to react—Suu’s surface liquefied, and he dropped through. He was surrounded by her green gel with only his face exposed.

“Hey, uh, Buddy?” Doppel said.

“Just. Wait. Okay, Master?” Suu said. A loud *crack* followed.

“Aaaaugh!” Kimihito screamed as she twisted him. It sounded like his bones were being broken.

“H-hey! Buddy! You okay?!” Doppel lost her cool.

“Ohhh *man*—this hurts!” Inside the gel his joints bent in unusual directions.

Suu continued to twist him, testing a variety of angles, ignoring his cries. “It will feel good soon,” she said.

“Ohhh myyy Good,” he groaned, his voice as inhuman as his current pose. Terrifying *cracks* and *snaps* continued to reverberate around the hospital.

Doppel and Lala both stared at the scene in shock, not sure what to do. If they

weren't careful pulling him out, his body could get stuck in a weird position.

"Now. It's good," Suu said as she finally released Kimihito. Her work finished, he floated to the top, and she turned back into a massage chair.

"Th-that—was—terrible," Kimihito gasped.

"Buddy! Hey! Are you alive? Did she break any bones?" Doppel asked.

"Uh—well—huh—?" He rolled onto his feet. He at least *looked* intact. His movements were smooth. "I feel kind of...light."

"Suu did an adjustment," Suu said.

He rolled his shoulder experimentally. Then he jumped a couple of times. Moving his arms and legs suddenly felt easy. "Suu! This is great! I feel light as a feather!"

"Suu did it right?"

Yeah—her massage made him feel the best he'd ever felt! Stretching himself out, he gave each of his joints a try in turn.

"Whoa! I'm jealous. Good job, Suu," Doppel said.

"Hee hee. ♪"

"It hurt a bit while it was happening, but—do you want to try too, Doppel?" Kimihito asked.

Doppel shook her head. "My body's built completely different from a human's. It won't work."

"You want to? You want to?" Suu wriggled her whole body like a pudding on a plate. She was eager to try again.

"May I?" Lala asked, raising her hand. She removed her head, set it on a nearby table, and sat her body on Suu.

"Wooooo~!" vibrated Suu.

Lala's body twitched and quivered. "Ahhhhh...like magic..." her head sighed.

"Suu...will make Lala...relax, too..."

"Could get used tae this..." She let out a moan like she was experiencing the

greatest pleasure of her life.

“So much for being here to help Kimihito,” Doppel said. “Guess it’s up to me. Shall we head to the bath?”

“The bath? Why? What’re you planning?” he asked warily.

“You’ll see. Look forward to it. While you’re getting changed, I’ll prepare.”

“Prepare...?”

Doppel, despite her nurse’s uniform, was wearing a very un-nurse-like evil grin. Knowing how much she liked playing practical jokes, he took it as a bad omen. “It’s fiiine. It’s a proper hot spring. Doesn’t that sound nice?”

Since there weren’t many places like this that catered to liminals, it made sense they’d have every possible relaxation option under the same roof. “I guess?” he said. A bath *did* sound like the perfect follow-up to that massage.

He allowed her to push him towards the bath area.

“Ahhhhh...ohhhhh...yessss...” Lala’s moans reverberated behind them as they left.

“Phew,” sighed Kimihito, settling up to his shoulders in the large bath. He hadn’t paid any mind to how much work he’d done, but his muscles had kept track, and he was surprised how much tension the massage and hot water had released.

As he got comfortable, he looked around him, taking in the sights of the bath. “This place is huge,” he remarked. To accommodate a range of liminals, it had very deep sections, very shallow sections, and even a single-person wooden tub to the side. None of them were quite right for a human like him, but that didn’t stop him getting comfortable.

“Plus...I feel kind of weird having the whole place to myself.” There was no one else around, but that didn’t make any sense. There’d been plenty of people in the massage room, so why wasn’t anyone in the bath? “Guess it means I can take my time,” he said, stretching out.

At that moment, a voice called out. “Heya, Buddy! Have you gotten warmed

up?” Wasn’t this the men’s bath? How’d she gotten in?

“Huh?”

“Ha ha ha! Look at your stupid face! Knew it’d be worth it to turn into the cleaning lady.” A completely nude Doppel entered the room.

“Doppel! Why’re you here?” he shouted.

“Didn’t I say I would be? I’m here to wash your back,” she said.

“You got rid of your uniform!”

“It’s a bath. Duh.” Not that nudity mattered to her. Her hair swept around her chest and nether region, keeping her decent. That didn’t change the fact that this was the *men’s* bath.

“What if someone comes in?”

“I put up a sign saying the baths are being cleaned. We’ve got the place to ourselves.” She’d clearly thought this through. “Come on over. Like I said, I’m here to wash your back.” She had poured body wash onto a sponge, and now she was close, kneading it and lathering it up. Her dark skin struck a beautiful contrast with the pale bubbles.

Crawling along the bath floor, she found a chair and brought it over for him to sit on. As she ducked, stood, crouched, and straightened, her hair followed along to keep her modest. It was impressive that it kept up.

Seeing her put in so much effort forced him to concede. “Ugh, fine,” he said. He stood from the water and wrapped a towel around his waist.

She was ready, the soapy sponge in hand. She smiled at him pleasantly.

He sat on the bath chair and allowed her to touch his back with the sponge. “I hope nobody sees this.”

“Nobody will. Jeez. If someone did, I’d turn into a guy, and we’d be fine,” she said.

“I guess so.” His back was coated in bubbles.

She started to scrub. “All right. Now, as thanks for your hard work, let me spoil you a bit.”

Confused, he just said, “Thanks...?”

“You really helped Zombina, Tio, and Manako this week,” she said as she continued to scrub, “despite having your homestay girls to take care of. I feel bad about that, and I want to make it up to you.”

“It wasn’t hard. Everyone else did their part, too.”

“Hah! If you say so. Tio was so happy she got to be an idol, and Manako was less shy when she got back to the office. Zombina, uh...I dunno, she got to drink alcohol? A due to the dead. Hah.” The fact she wanted to do something for him was so unexpected that he hadn’t fully processed it yet. She loved to play practical jokes and get him flustered and tease him, but there was also a side to her that cared for MON and the other people around her.

“Why’re you making that face?” she asked as she scrubbed a few more inches clean.

“I’ve just never heard you talk about your colleagues like that, Doppel,” he said.

“Well. I don’t, normally. It’s been weird working apart this week. The work program felt kinda private.”

“Private how?”

“Like Tio getting to live her idol dream without us seeing it. We don’t know what happened on that stage.”

“Ahh, true.” She’d been incredible, and had an incredible night, but MON hadn’t been there to share it with her.

“That’s why I want to show my gratitude for you looking after the team. In lieu of Smith saying so, I’m here to say thanks, Buddy.”

“You’re welcome.”

“So that about sums up why I’m giving you this nice, skillful wash! Pity I’m not a cute girl, that’d be the icing on the cake, huh?” She took the detachable showerhead from its fixture so she could rinse the huge mass of bubbles off his skin.

The embarrassment set back in when he heard her describe the situation, but

there was one part of her description he couldn't let stand. "That's not true, Doppel."

"Huh?"

"You *are* a cute girl," he said.

There was a long silence. He had his back to her, so he couldn't see, but her body had frozen, and her hair had moved in to cover her reddening face.

"Doppel?" he asked when the silence went too long. He tried to turn.

Her hair wrapped around his head and forced him to face forward.

"Gwuh!"

"J-just give me a minute!" she said.

"If you're embarrassed, put on some clothes!"

"You *know* that's not what this is about! I'm gonna rinse you, so stay put!"

"Blugh!" he spluttered as he was struck with pressurized water. Doppel soaped up the sponge again for another round of scrubbing. He stayed still and didn't bother resisting.

"Okay, time for the front!"

"What?! I'm fine, I'll do that part!"

"Quit complaining! Nurse Doppel is here!"

"Why do you sound so angry?!"

Soon they were scuffling. Doppel tried to tear off Kimihito's towel, and he tried his darndest to keep it on. Her usual devious expression had returned. There wasn't a hint of mercy in her eyes.

"I'm done! It's fine! I'm clean!" Kimihito said.

"No you're not!" Doppel shouted.

He escaped her grasp and bolted for the changing room with shocking speed. He'd had to learn how to dodge his liminal housemates, and those techniques had long since become muscle memory. And after all the treatments he was in peak condition. Unstoppable.

“Ugh. Whatever. I *did* get to say thanks,” Doppel said, scratching her head. “It’s fine to relax sometimes, right? In the bath, or—” She looked at the tubs. “Yeah. Whatever. Let’s just take a bath.” Stepping into the water, she sank in deep.

“Um...”

“Hm?” Kimihito had gotten out of the bath, dressed, and bought some coffee-flavored milk to sip. Midway through his drink, Lala approached, still in her strange nurse uniform-scarf combo.

“What’s up, Lala?” he asked.

“Y’see...” She fidgeted. He knew this was a misdirection to hide her awkwardness. Whenever she either spouted off paragraphs of flowery prose, or refused to speak at all, it was cover for her not knowing what to say. At times like this, he couldn’t figure her out either.

“Do you...need my help?”

“Uh...” She hid her lower face in her scarf and peered at him over it. “Tha’ wretched mound o’ slime and her benighted, tricksome accomplice hae disappeared in pursuit of some unknown end.”

“If you mean Doppel’s in the bath, I know. Why?”

“She claimed it was mixed bathing.”

“Yeah...”

“She also advised not tae bother her. Thus I must focus on me own dark tasks. Which is tae say, the work of a nurse,” Lala paused, struggling with what to say next. “Yet I am a shinigami, a reaper of souls, who leads mortals tae their final rest. When Yuuhi spoke tae me, I realized I am incapable of healing you without making a hash of it.”

“That’s why you’re upset?”

“I’m not upset! I’m a shinigami! It’s just—I’m not comfortable with a job so contrary to me nature.”

She was getting more nervous as they talked. He sighed. “Want some coffee milk?”

“Hm. Yes,” she said.

He bought her a bottle with some change and brought it over.

Lala’s expression stayed neutral as she lifted her head and poured the milk into her exposed esophagus. He supposed most humans would’ve been uncomfortable watching that, but he was used to it.

“Ahhh,” Lala said as she replaced her head like a cap on a bottle.

“Do you feel any calmer?”

“Aye, t’be sure. I am a shinigami. I may wear the wings of an angel, but ’tis the underworld I consort with.”

“Well—” Before he could reply, she pulled her scythe from who-knew-where. She usually carried it around with her, and he hadn’t figured out where it went when she didn’t. It was like magic how she manifested it from thin air. “Wh-what’re you doing—”

“I regret tae say, this is the only option before us.”

“Watch where you’re waving that scythe—”

She ignored his protests and swung it hard at his neck.

Stars danced in his vision. “Hngh—” He felt his consciousness fading. As he sank into oblivion, he felt, improbably, like he had been there before.

A river burbled nearby. There was a chattering like birdsong. Despite the tranquil sounds, Kimihito knew where he was—on the banks of the Sanzu River, where only the dead or dying could go. “Ungh, Lala...!” He sat up abruptly as he fully regained consciousness.

As he did, he realized that his head had been lying on her lap. In the world of the living, she’d been wearing nurse’s whites. Her current outfit was clearly still a nurse’s uniform but changed, customized to her personality. She was still in a healing mood, then.

“You don’t have to kill me every time you want to tell me something important,” he grumbled.

“I can’t get the words right if I don’t say it here!” She averted her eyes as her face turned red.

By “here,” she meant the afterlife—or, to be more precise, the boundary between life and death. Whenever Lala had to discuss something important and couldn’t get past her difficulty speaking, she’d bring him to the riverside.

Of course, despite his best efforts, Kimihito had more than his fair share of near-death experiences. He was becoming familiar—if not comfortable—with this place. Whenever he returned to life and left, he’d forget what happened, only to remember on his next visit.

These were rare opportunities to hear what Lala was *really* thinking. “What did you want to talk about?” he asked.

“Um.” As a dullahan, a liminal who styled herself as a guardian of the dead, she was in her element. She could be more straightforward here than in the living world, but it didn’t make her outright confident. No matter how relaxed and in her element she felt, she was still Lala. “I—I just wanted tae soothe ye as the other girls have,” she said.

“By trying to kill me?”

“You’ll get better!”

“Hmph. Fine. What’s done is done.” They’d been through this routine a few times now. She was right, it didn’t have any lasting consequences, and he was always revived without any trouble. His ambivalence to being killed was part of what made him so popular with liminals... He wasn’t sure how to feel about that. “Has coming here given you any ideas?”

“In this world ye’re just yer soul. Doppel and Suu tended tae yer body, so I thought I’d do something spiritual instead.”

“I see...” It *was* a soothing place, with a clear sky, the delicate murmur of the river, and a field of flowers stretching in every direction. If he weren’t just a soul, he’d suggest a picnic. “How does that work, though?”

“I am a dullahan: guardian of souls, shepherd of souls, shaper of souls.”

“R-really?” he asked. What did that even mean?

This was Lala’s world, Kimihito was just un-living in it, so he had to trust she could do whatever she was planning. “First,” she said and tugged her head off with an audible *pop*. As ever, she treated it like an object. “Take me head.”

“Okay?” He took it from her. Though he was sure it’d look ghoulish to others, he was used to it. Was it bad he’d gotten used to it?

Her headless body sat next to him.

“I took your head,” he said.

“Mm-hmm,” she said.

“What do we do now?”

She didn’t reply. He peeked curiously at the head in his arms and discovered... she was sleeping. Lala’s head rested on Kimihito’s lap and breathed deeply, eyes closed tight.

“H-hey, Lala! Wake up!”

“Huh?” She woke with a start. “I wasn’t sleeping. I dinna fall asleep.”

“Then what was that? Wasn’t I supposed to be the one relaxing?”

“Yer arms were so comfortable I dozed a bit. However, this is a land of spirits, where it is impossible to ‘sleep’.”

“Then what were you doi—”

“It was an illusion,” she said. “Just hold me. Please.”

“O-okay.”

“Um...how is it?”

“How’s what?”

“Isn’t it soothing? Like holding a plush toy?” There was a triumphant look on her face.

“A plush toy? Really?”

“Are ye not soothed?” Her triumph was replaced with sadness.

“Um...of course it’s soothing! Your cheeks are so soft and huggable, like a mascot character!” A severed head mascot character sounded unlikely, but he didn’t want to upset her.

“Hold me as long as you like, then.”

“Thanks.”

“As fer me body...” It leapt to its feet in surprise, like a soldier called to attention. “How ’bout a dance?” As she spoke, her body did an awkward, dance-like shuffle. It looked a bit like a marionette being pulled around against its will. It was obvious she wasn’t used to dancing.

“Not if you don’t want to!” he said to her body.

The body paused, its limbs slack, and then dropped back onto the grass beside him. It seemed like, despite being part of the same person, her head and body each had minds of their own. “Ye know, yer a very special person, Kimihito,” she said.

“Hm?”

“Your soul never tires. Perhaps there’s some weariness, but it powers through, too committed tae others tae ever let itself rest. Weren’t ye exhausted after all those nights with Miia and the others?”

“A bit, but it was a lot of fun, so I didn’t notice. I didn’t want to miss any of it.”

“How’m I supposed tae heal ye, though, if there’s nothing tae heal?” she said forlornly.

“Maybe it’s not obvious,” he said, “but this *is* healing.” Except for... “I wish I didn’t have to have a near-death experience to come here.”

“Oh. I’m sorry about that.”

She might act out, but she always apologizes. Lala’s such a kind girl, thought Kimihito. “It doesn’t seem to cause any damage. In fact, when I wake up, it’s kinda refreshing. Isn’t visiting the countryside supposed to be good for your health?”

“True.”

It had been a busy few days. Miia, Papi, Centorea, Suu, Mero, and Rachnera... everyone did their best for the pilot program. Lala, too. Maybe all their efforts were for a boring, bureaucratic purpose, but they'd made it a special experience. It didn't matter that he was tired. He was just grateful he'd been there.

“But I'm kinda surprised, Lala, that you're interested in something as mundane as a work experience.”

“I am nae,” she said immediately. Here, in her own space, she could be honest with him. The real Lala was kinder than she seemed but also colder somehow. “However, I made a promise.”

“A promise?”

“Yes. We all did. A promise to help ye. Ye are very loved,” she said.

“Really?” Kimihito asked. He hadn't noticed. Suddenly, in that moment, he realized what Miia and the other girls had been planning. “Everyone said they wanted to do the work experience program so they could buy clothes and stuff—but some of them mentioned other plans, too. Do you know anything about that, Lala?”

“Maybe ye've figured it out, but I'd prefer not tae ruin the surprise.”

“I'll pretend not to know, then,” he said with a smile.

Whatever he realized in this world would be forgotten the moment he woke. Any guesses he made here, whether they were right or not, wouldn't matter soon anyway.

“Ahh,” Lala sighed, “it's about time.”

“For me to leave?”

“Ye'll wake naturally.”

Just as she said it, he started to feel sleepy. He was about to revive from his near-death experience. It'd happened before. He didn't doubt it'd happen again.

“Always cuddling up to someone, eh?” Lala murmured.

His eyes fluttered. Though her head was in his hands, it sounded much farther away. The burble of the river subsided. The field, and his field of vision, filled with mist.

“Ye’re such a warm person. I’d like tae stay close to you,” she said. Her voice was no louder than a whisper. Adrift, lost between two worlds, he’d almost passed on when...

Lala’s body pulled him back onto her lap. He felt himself recline into her. Her lap was so soft. “Don’t forget. After ye die, yer soul belongs tae me.”

He couldn’t understand her words, but he recognized the excitement in her voice.

“It’s up tae ye tae enjoy yer remaining time on earth.”

“Master! Master!”

“Hey, Buddy, you okay?”

Voices echoed around him. When he opened his eyes, two green and tan blurs stood over him. They resolved into two girls who leapt into his arms. “Wh—?! Suu! Doppel!”

“Finally! You were passed out cold on the floor!” Doppel shouted.

He looked around. Suu prodded at him in concern, fingertips squishing like jelly.

“What happened?” he asked. He remembered drinking coffee milk and...then nothing. He didn’t know why he’d collapsed.

“You okay, Master? Your body’s not weird?” Suu asked.

“No, it’s...it’s fine,” he said. Despite falling on a tiled floor, he didn’t have any cuts or bruises, and he felt refreshed. “No pain, no stress, no injuries. Must’ve been your massage, Suu.”

“Really? Really true?”

“Really.” He stood and flexed his shoulder in a circle. He meant to show how

well he was feeling, but Suu's worried expression didn't change at all.

"So what, you just got tired and fell asleep?" Doppel asked, skeptical.

"Yeah, that's probably it," he said. "I must've just been really relaxed after everything you both did."

"Hey now." The compliment made the concern on her face change into a grin. "Don't think flattery'll get you another round, y'know?"

Suu finally smiled, too.

"*You.*" It was a soft, severe voice—Lala had crept up on them without a sound. "How fare ye?"

"Lala...? I'm fine. What's wrong?" he asked.

"I have long since tired of this outfit. Let us depart these blinding halls for darker realms," Lala said.

Doppel seemed sick of the outfit, too. "Yeah, let's get changed and roll out. Home time! And you get some real sleep, Buddy, I was worried you'd hit your head."

"But I feel fine..." he mumbled.

He felt Lala's gaze on him for a moment, but as he turned to meet it, she avoided him.

Kimihito wasn't sure what that meant. Although...before Doppel and Suu woke him, he might've seen her face in his dreams.

"Master, home," Suu said, holding his hand. Her grip was soft and cool, and he smiled when he felt it.

He didn't remember what had happened while he was asleep, but whatever it was, it had taken the last bit of tension from him. Both his body and soul were at peace. That he awoke so refreshed proved it was time well spent.

EPILOGUE

AFTER A HARD
DAY'S WORK



“**G**REAT JOB, Darling-kun! ♪” It was a few days after the work experience program concluded. Kimihito was at a Tokyo area café with Ms. Smith—the same café, in fact, where he’d met Polt. Smith drank hot coffee and skimmed the paperwork in front of her. Bar, theater, maid café, hospital...it was the reports sent by each location. “So, are you all right? Says here you fainted at the hospital.”

“I’m still not sure what happened there. My best guess is that I stayed in the bath too long,” Kimihito said.

“Would a healthy young man like yourself *really* pass out from something so minor?” She looked up from her paperwork, expression serious beneath her sunglasses. Once she’d held his gaze for a moment, she swapped in a reassuring smile. “What I mean is, maybe I worked you too hard. Be sure to take a break.”

She was usually overworked and agitated by the volume of work her office took on, but meeting her apart from her team, she seemed a lot calmer. “You really came through on these work experiences. The paperwork’s filled out, and we’ve got the info we need. When we came by your house, we thought we were doomed—it’s a huge relief it came together so easily. Thank goodness!”

“Despite how many issues we had?” he asked.

“That’s normal. Nothing’s perfect on the first try,” she said dismissively and then took a sip of her coffee. “Thanks to your help, every situation resolved itself with minimal fuss. We’ve got a lot of evidence that liminals can succeed in the workforce, provided they have some support. It’s an incredible step forward.”

“I-is that so?”

“Nobody else could’ve handled it like you. Thank you so much, Darling-kun.” She lifted her sunglasses and beamed at him. “For helping MON, too.”

“No, you’ve got it backwards. It was Zombina and the others who helped me.”

“If you say so. Anyway, there’s nothing else I need from you for the moment. Take the money you earned and live it up with the rest of the Kurusu household!”

“Sure...”

“By the way, we could’ve met there. Why’d you pick this café?”

“Oh!” He took a sip from his own cup. “The coffee’s really good.” He’d had the chance to sample it when he came by with Polt. “Also, Miia kicked me out this morning.”

“What, did you cheat on her?” Smith chuckled.

“It’s not like that!” he scrambled to deny it. “She’s shedding, and Papi’s laying an egg, then Centorea needed her shoes changed—y’know, they’re all just *busy*, and I was getting in the way.”

“Haven’t you helped with shedding and egg laying before, though?”

“That’s true, but they wanted privacy today.”

“*Darling, go out for a while.*” Miia was strangely cold as she said it. Normally he spent his time either dealing with the girls at home or running errands, so shut out on his own, he wasn’t sure what to do.

“Oh ho, I see.”

“And Rachnee had work, and Mero had to call her mother, and Suu said she wanted to clean. I don’t know what Lala is doing, but she pushed me out of the house.” Lala had led him to the door, but he couldn’t ask her why because her head was missing.

“Which is why you invited me out,” Smith said. Of course, they both wanted to discuss the work experiences anyway, but she’d usually be the one to call him unexpectedly, not the other way around. But once he’d been kicked out of the house, it seemed like a good use of his time. “Here I thought I was being asked on a date—but I’m just a replacement for those other girls. You’re too cruel!” She faked a sob.

“Come on! I didn’t think you’d see it like that!”

“Heh heh, I know. It’s just a joke,” she said, waving her hand and wiping away her crocodile tears. “I think they can take care of themselves for today. Don’t worry too much.” She rested her chin on her hands and gave him a wry smile.

“I get that, but did they have to kick me out?”

“Girls have their reasons.”

“Ah, a woman’s heart is a complicated thing.” He tried to make it sound sarcastic, but it came out sincere.

“True,” Smith agreed. “Human or liminal, women are complex. Let them finish what they’re doing, head home after dark, and it’ll all be fine.”

“Yeah. I’ll just, uh, read a book. Or something,” he said, completely dispirited.

Smith regarded him with a fond expression, like she was looking at her annoying little brother. “Maybe there’s a decent movie on? I miss having time for movies.”

“Do you ever get a break?”

“Nope~! And guess what? I’ve got another meeting right now,” she said, checking her watch. “Sorry to ditch you. Thanks for answering my questions. It was fun to hear.”

“It might’ve been rushed, but thanks for organizing the program. We had a great experience,” he said. That was the truth, and he was sure the girls felt the same.

“Glad to hear it, ♪” Smith said. “We’ve deposited the bonus in your bank account. Miia-chan and the others had their money delivered by hand.”

“That was fast,” he remarked.

“Well, have a good time!” She downed the rest of her coffee and rushed out of the coffee shop before he could take a breath.

What did she mean by “have a good time”? Maybe this was about his free time today. Trouble was, he was so used to being around the girls, he didn’t know how to spend time alone anymore.

“Something strange is going on,” he grumbled to himself.

Everyone was a bit off today. Miia, Papi, Centorea, and all of them. Even Smith. With how often she dropped unexpected work on him, he knew her tells, and she was definitely holding something back. The question was, what?

“And what am I gonna do until nightfall...?”

A barista came and gently placed the receipt for two coffees in front of him. As unusual as their meeting had been, it was frustratingly normal that Smith skipped the bill.

“Welcome home, Darling!” Miia shouted. A delicious smell greeted Kimihito as he arrived. Miia wore a broad smile and, for some reason, an apron. “I’m so sorry we kicked you out! But we couldn’t get things ready if you were still here! I didn’t mean to be cold. Are you mad?” She kept talking as she snaked her arms around him and cuddled him close.

He wasn’t sure what was going on, but before he could ask, Rachnera appeared to pry Miia away. “Calm down already.”

“Uh, did something happen, Rachnee?” Kimihito asked.

“Everyone’s been getting ready. We needed a ruse to get you out of the house. Or seven ruses, as it turned out.” She turned to Miia. “You have to tell him what’s happening first, don’t you know that?”

“Buuuuut! I was so mean to him before he left, if I didn’t give him a warm greeting, he’d think we were over!” Miia cried.

“But nothing,” Rachnera replied.

“What were you preparing for?” Kimihito asked, still confused.

“You really don’t know? Heh. It’s a party to celebrate your surviving the work experience.”

“Every step of the way, you were there to help, Darling! Since you always do the cooking and the cleaning, we thought that this time, we’d do them ourselves!”

“The shedding and egg-laying were just excuses to get you out. Were you worried?” Rachnera asked.

Kimihito nodded. That explained the delicious smell—they’d been working hard to make him dinner.

“I tried so hard to get the food right!” Miia said. She had been sickeningly bad at cooking, but recently, she’d started to improve.

“I kept an eye on her. At the very least, it’s edible,” Rachnera added. The two of them smiled in guarantee. He felt embarrassed that he’d complained to Smith about this, but he smiled too, determined not to show it.

“All right!” Miia declared, bursting into the fully-decorated living room. There were plates of food set out like a buffet, and the girls stood around with drinks in their hands. “Tonight, we’re celebrating our successful entry into the work force! Awesome work, everybody! Special thanks to Darling, of course! Cheers!”

Everyone clinked their glasses together with an echoing “cheers!” and tipped back a mouthful of non-alcoholic champagne.

“Milord, I could not have weathered that trial alone. You have my gratitude,” Centorea said.

“I got fish from home, Beloved!” Mero bragged.

“Yes, and the meat and eggs are from the farm we visited a while ago. As fresh as possible.”

On top of making the dinner, Miia had taken pains with how she plated and arranged the food—though Rachnera had probably helped. Kimihito felt bad as he took a piece of roast beef from the display, but his guilt disappeared as he bit in. The texture and the flavor were both exceptional. “This is incredible, Miia,” he said, finishing his mouthful.

“Hee hee heeeee. Darling likes my cooking! ♪” Miia’s whole body began to wiggle with joy.

“Hey, Miia, didn’t you have something else to say to him?” Rachnera asked.

“I’m not an idiot!” Miia clapped back. “Uh, um...sooo, Darling...” She squirmed bashfully. “Nooo, I’m too embarrassed!”

“If you won’t do it, I will.”

“Huh?” Kimihito said.

Rachnera reached below the table to pick something up. It was a wine bottle with a ribbon around the neck. “Here, Honey, it’s a present from me to you.”

“A present? Wait, did you use your money for—”

“Bingo. We each picked our own gift and then organized this party together. It’s a token of thanks for your hard work every day.”

“Really?” Kimihito exclaimed. Finally, he knew their secret. They’d been so dutiful at their placements, and this must’ve been the reason.

“There’s not much for us to buy for ourselves, anyway. It made more sense to do something nice for you,” Rachnera said and handed the bottle over. “Save it for a special occasion. You’ll have to include me, of course.”

“Ahhh! I was going to give him my present first!” Miia started to sniffle.

“Should’ve slithered in faster.”

Kimihito accepted the wine. “Thanks, Rachnee. I look forward to drinking it.”

“Of course, everyone else has a gift, too.” She gestured around to the rest of them. Centorea and Mero both took out presents of their own.

“Milord! Given your practicality, I felt it best to gift you something useful. These are sneakers. May you wear them on your journeys,” Centorea said.

Mero went next. “I bought a glassware set! If you’re ever game, I’d love to share a drink in the—”

“Come ooon! Everyone’s jumping the line!” Miia shouted, finding herself at the back of the group as they crowded around to give him their presents.

He didn’t even have time to thank everyone as they bombarded him with gifts.

“Papi bought a new game system!” She’d opened it, too, and taken a controller out. She waved it over her head in excitement.

“Suu bought...a raincoat.” Suu snuck an appendage into Papi’s box and took the other controller. It seemed dinner was over.

“Behold! An ominous death’s head charm, as befits yer cursed soul. Like a psychopomp forever at your side, memento mori,” Lala said, offering him a silver skull accessory.

Present after present was stacked in his arms. Each of them had thought

about what he would want. Between that and the surprise party...he felt himself tearing up in appreciation. “E-everyone, thank you so much,” he sniffed.

“Oh my. Honey, are you crying?” Rachnera teased.

“No way!” He was definitely crying. He tried to wipe away the evidence.

“Oh, no, Darling,” Miia said, hugging him around the neck with her arms while her tail coiled around his legs.

“Guh!” Before he could process his feelings, she’d enveloped him in her love.

She dragged him across the floor. “Finally! Here it is!” She grabbed something and waved it around.

“W-what’s this?”

“It’s a wallet!” She moved the sealed box in front of him. “It’s your perfect match! Please use it! Maybe even put a photo of me inside, huh?”

“Cut it out.” Rachnera tugged Miia away before she could crush him.

He caught the package and removed the tape. Inside was a wallet, as promised—exceptionally well made from vibrant red snakeskin. Of course.

“Heh heh,” Miia laughed, “since I’m a lamia, I can say for sure that’s top-quality leather.”

“Does it not make you feel as though you were made into a wallet yourself?” asked Centorea.

“Huh? But I’m not really a snake. We just look alike.”

Overwhelmed by their generosity—almost literally, given how many gifts he was balancing—Kimihiro smiled. “Thank you so much, everyone.”

The girls smiled as well. Just as he was always thinking of them, they were thinking of him, too. That was what made him happiest. He thought back to when Smith had asked him to pick a bride from the group. *You know*, he thought, *I couldn’t possibly choose between them*. Each one of them was endlessly charming, and they all had hidden charms still to be found. He felt bad for Smith, but he couldn’t be forced into a decision yet.

“Well, don’t stop the party! Papi, Suu, no video games until after dinner!”

“Okaaay!” they sang in unison.

“Miia, are you absolutely certain this food is edible? I have a sensitive stomach which won’t tolerate anything...dubious,” Centorea said.

“I told you, it’s perfect! Darling said it was delicious! Weren’t you listening?” Miia replied.

“You’ve had more than your share of failures in the past.”

“What do you mean, ‘failures’?”

“Calm down, I made sure to test it—” Rachnera interjected.

“I arranged everything, Boss!” Papi crowed.

“Suu helped!” Suu asserted.

“Heh heh. These decorations were handcrafted tae bring comfort tae your weary soul... Look on me works and rejoice,” Lala said.

It was a bustling party. How could it not be, with seven liminal girls hosting? But these days were precious to Kimihito, and he refused to take them for granted.

I’ve got to pay them back somehow... he thought, though he did worry it’d create an infinite payback cycle; constantly paying each other back for being paid back. *What’s the best way to do this?* Each of their gifts had been so thoughtful and personal. *Wait.*

Come to think of it, he had those resort passes from Polt! It was an experience that could handle all seven of them, and since it was run by the Kobold Company, it would definitely cater to liminals. “Hey, everybody?”

“What is it, Darling?” Miia replied.

“As a thank-you, I’ve got these.” He fanned the tickets out in front of them.

The girls’ eyes sparkled, and within minutes, the trip was planned.

Not long after that, Smith and the MON members came by for dinner, too—as soon as they had the night off work.

But that's a different story.

This has been a story of Kurusu Kimihito's everyday life...with monster girls.

Special Short Story: I Guess I Can Wear a White Coat...?

“I JUST REALLY HATE CLOTHES!” Doppel shouted, looking like she wanted to cry. She was wearing a nurse’s uniform as part of her work experience. But she wasn’t going to be curing anyone or anything—it was basically just a costume in the end. “It’s so embarrassing to wear them!” Doppel went on. “Why are you guys fine with it?”

“I...have no answer.” Lala said, recoiling from her strong opinions.

“Suu likes clothes!” Suu said, tilting her head innocently.

“If you are truly so discomfited by wearing clothing, perhaps simpler attire would suit you better?” Lala asked.

“Yeah... If it isn’t too tight, it doesn’t bother me. But what does that mean I should wear?” Doppel asked.

“Take this, Suu.” Lala said, pulling a white coat out from somewhere. She seemed to have a huge number of them, but it wasn’t clear where she was pulling them from.

“Huh? Can I wear this?” Suu asked.

“You may.” Lala replied.

Suu melted her body instantly, turning into a vague slime shape. She traveled out of the nurse’s costume and then returned to her human-like form. The now naked Suu took the white coat from Lala’s hands. “I put it on,” she said, putting on the coat. However, Suu was short enough that the long hem of the doctor’s coat trailed on the ground, and the sleeves were too long. The empty sleeves flapped around.

“You look like a naked little girl wearing a doctor’s coat.” Doppel said. It was a really immoral look, which Lala hadn’t predicted—she was struck dumb by the sight.

“Suu looks...weird?” Suu asked.

“No, no, it doesn’t look weird at all! Maybe I’ll just throw it over my shoulders, in a casual way.” She took off her nurse’s uniform as quickly as possible and then immediately threw the white coat over her shoulders. “How do I look? Call me Dr. Doppel, please.” Naked, with the doctor’s coat hanging off her neck, she struck a pose. Somehow, that looked sketchier than her just being completely naked.

“Oh, looks nice, Doppel.” Suu said.

“The darkness of thee of indeterminate form with naught but the pure white overcoat on...it is a sight that could send the world into madness,” Lala murmured.

“Heh heh heh. Now even I can wear some clothes casually...” Doppel said, but her movements started to stiffen. “I can...”

Suu and Lala both looked at her quizzically. Under their curious gazes, she started to tremble slightly. Her face reddened.

“Ahhhh! Nope, too embarrassing!” she shouted, tearing the white coat off as she reached her limit. “It’s much easier for me to be naked.”

It was even clearer than before that Doppel had trouble wearing clothes, no matter the type.

CREATOR PROFILES

Okayado *Monster Musume* debuted in the second volume of the anthology comic *Kemomo* in 2011. It later began serialization in *Comic Ryu*'s May 2012 issue. The first volume was released in September of that same year, and it received such a positive response that another printing was announced the morning of the first day of sales. It is still being serialized in that same magazine and remains very popular.

There was also an extremely positive reaction to the TV anime, which began broadcasting in July of 2015. It boasts international popularity and has hit the top of the North American sales rankings. It was ranked fifth in the manga division of the Sugo! Japan Awards in 2016. It has won the Bookwalker prize for best franchise. Okayado's other comics include *12 Beast*, published by Kadokawa.

Yoshino Origuchi Yoshino Origuchi's debut was a novel published by Dengeki called *Kubatsu no Akuma Shoukanjutsu*. His other books include *Monster Girl Hunter* from Dengeki and *Monster Girl Doctor* from Dash X Bunko. *Monster Girl Doctor* has been adapted into a *Comic Ryu* web title by Tomas Tetsumaki, and it is currently ongoing.

All the most up-to-date information on *Monster Musume* can be found on the official twitter account: @monmusuofficial!



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